

## Introduction to Popular Culture

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Every country has its contributions to the rich and diverse iconography we know. Japan has J-Pop, visual *kei*, anime, and crazy-upbeat local commercials. The United Kingdom gave us The Beatles, Spice Girls, Doctor Who, and Mr. Bean. The United States has many icons, from Elvis Presley, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Vogue, Ted Bundy, and the Coen Brothers, among others. South Korea gave us K-Pop, The Body Shop, Samsung, and K-Drama. Cuba has Che Guevara, Mexico has Selena Quintanilla -- even the Philippines has its own contributions ranging from Trese, Manny Pacquiao, and Lea Salonga to Ben Cab and Bob Ong, to name a few.

All these things all have one (1) thing in common -- they have shaped our everyday life in one way or another. They have become part of our culture.

### Defining Culture

Raymond Schuck (n.d.), who referenced Raymond Williams in defining the word "culture," **culture** itself *is a way of living*, covering a broad range of aspects from traditions, values, and beliefs, to behaviors, daily tasks, rituals, social norms, and rules to name a few. The only thing that makes them a part of culture is if a group of people agreed to observe it. As an example, look at your classmates -- each class is divided into different social "cliques," with each clique having their own shared hobbies, conversations, and agreed norms. It is cliché, of course, but you cannot deny that cliques exist in one form or another.

If you try to hang out with the other "tribes" in your classroom, you will know the difference between your "social tribe" and your classmates'.

As observed and defined by Matthew Arnold in 1869, culture is "*the best that has been thought and said in the world*" (Arnold, 1869). In his time, he feared that since working-class men began to enter politics, which was a common topic in the social circles of the upper-class, his idea of culture might collapse since anarchy is not far behind -- a notion Arnold argued since the working-class might use politics to further their personal agenda. Nowadays, Arnold's perspective is considered a vital point in studying culture, although his point-of-view suggests that his view is an elitist perspective.

### The Spectrum of Culture

Due to the nature of culture covering almost every social aspect, we can determine the three (3) major spectra of culture.

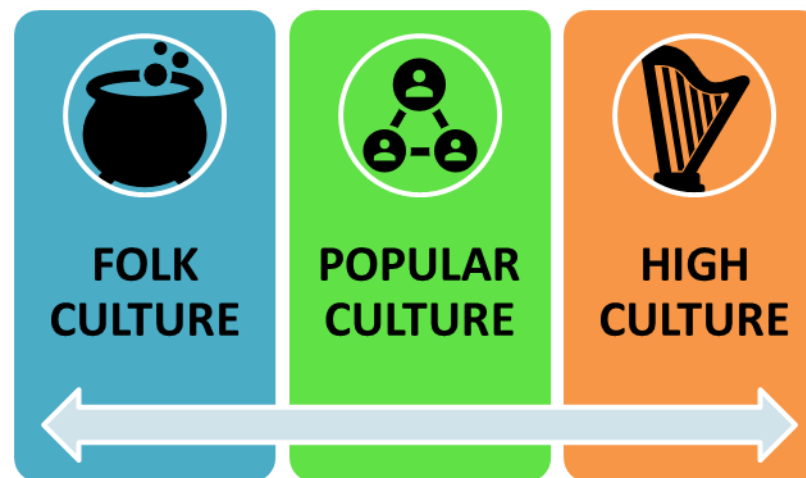


Figure 1. The spectrum of culture

The rightmost end of the spectrum is what we consider to be a **high** (or **sophisticated**) culture. This culture spectrum is what we usually associate with intellectual discourse, high-brow comedy, and elaborate literature, to name a few, because it reflects the best aesthetics of a particular society. Wolfgang Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, *Gitanjali* by Rabindranath Tagore, Lucrecia Kasilag's *Philippine*

*Scenes*, and Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* are some examples of icons representing high culture.

- *The Magic Flute* is an opera composed by the late Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart based on the *libretto* made by Emanuel Schikaneder. It is one (1) of the many Western compositions that reflect the best aesthetics in terms of orchestration and storytelling.
- *Gitanjali* is a collection of poems written by the late Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore which talks about man's beliefs and spirituality. It is one (1) of many important cultural heritages of India.
- The orchestral music *Philippine Scenes* by Lucrecia Kasilag utilizes our country's folk musical instruments and includes some vocal noises. These elements invoke a sense of locality we Filipinos reminisce about during festivals and viewing local sceneries.
- *The Nutcracker* is a famous Christmas ballet performed worldwide. It was composed and written by Pyotr Tchaikovsky. It is so iconic; many people associate Christmastime with watching *The Nutcracker*.

On the leftmost end of the spectrum is **folk culture**, roughly described as something shared first in a certain group of people before being disseminated to the general population (University System of Georgia, n.d.). It means traditions, music, and anything else practiced by a certain group is exclusively theirs until they share it with the rest. This idea stems from the word **folk**, which, when traced to its Old Norse-English-German origin, describes an army or a small group of people. This exclusivity ensures that folk culture is stable over time as long as people practice it but remains variable across geographies.

Having different regions and ethnicities gives us a rich diversity and a plethora of regional and ethnic music, way of living, and beliefs, among other practices. This is reflected in celebrating various *fiestas* all over the country and being performed in field demonstrations in schools. Some examples of folk culture components include:

1. Songs such as *Paruparong Bukid*, *Atin Cu Pung Singsing*, and *Leron, Leron Sinta*;
2. Dances such as *Tinikling*, *Singkil*, and *Pandanggo sa Ilaw*;
3. Festivals such as *Ati-Atihan*, *Higantes*, and *Sinulog*;

4. Folk icons such as *Malakas* and *Maganda*; *Pilandok*; and the various mythological gods and entities

If high culture encompasses the intellectual and sophisticated aspects of culture, and folk culture represents the exclusive representation of culture, the middleman (i.e., sharing both worlds) is popular culture. **Popular culture** (also called **mass** or **mainstream culture** in some references), also known by its short name **pop culture**, is generally defined as *the collection of traditions and material culture of a particular society* (Crossman, 2019). What it presents is that popular culture is exclusive to a certain group of people, with the scope of its knowledge and existence contained only to that group. However, much like folk culture, it can only be as timeless as the people who know them -- if no one knows about it nor can access them, its essence fades. Because of its availability, it is sometimes called **low culture** to contrast the sophistication upheld by high culture.

### Defining Popular Culture

Popular culture, as its name implies, is anything that the general population can access easily. It includes music, art, literature, fashion, dance, film, television, radio, and recently, the Internet. According again to John Storey, popular culture can be intricately defined in six (6) ways (Crossman, 2019):

1. *Popular culture* is simply a culture that *is widely favored (or well-liked) by many people*. It means the popular culture has no negative connotations because people like them and agreed to uphold this mutual affection.
2. *Popular culture* is *whatever is left after* you have identified what "*high culture*" is. This definition argues that popular culture is considered inferior because of its accessibility. It serves as a marker of status and class -- which, in this case, is being *bourgeois* (i.e., the working class, the capable public).
3. *Popular culture* can be defined as *commercial objects that are produced for mass consumption by non-discriminating consumers*. This one supports the second definition of popular culture. However, it connotes that it is also treated as a tool the elites use to suppress (or take advantage of) the masses.
4. *Popular culture* is folk culture, *something that arises from the people rather than imposed upon them*. This states that popular culture is authentic (created by the people) instead of commercial

(thrust upon them by commercial enterprises). This one directly opposes the connotation pointed out by the third definition.

5. *Popular culture is negotiated.* Popular culture is partly imposed on the dominant classes and partially resisted (or changed) by the subordinate classes. It entails that the group with the capacity (i.e., the upper class) can produce and contribute much to the development of culture. Still, the group with less power (i.e., the working and lower classes) gets to decide which ones are popular and which ones will fade.
6. The last definition of popular culture is that, in the postmodern world (i.e., today), the distinction between "authentic" versus "commercial" is blurred. *In popular culture today, users are free to embrace some manufactured content, alter it for their own use, or reject it entirely and create their own.* Because of its accessibility, the working class can now contribute to the development of culture while retaining the capacity to decide which ones will stay and which ones will fade.

### Categories of Popular Culture

Popular culture is usually categorized into six (6) major groups: *entertainment, sports, news, politics, lifestyle, and technology.*

- The **entertainment** category encompasses varied forms of media, but it usually includes *television, film, music, and literature.* This category also covers celebrities and artists, to name a few. Examples include K-Pop, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Lea Salonga, and the Coen Brothers.
- The **lifestyle** category covers any new trend that people perform and/or consume, including *fashion, art, dance, language, and food trends.* This category also highlights visual artists, cosplays, and celebrity chefs, to name a few. Examples include visual *kei*, Ben Cab, swardspeak, and vogue dancing.
- The **sports** category covers anything related to traditional sports, including printed merchandise and icons and *electronic sports* (or *eSports*). Examples include the NBA, GLOCO, Mobile Legends (or ML), and Bea Binene.
- The **news** category covers any news event that has gained significant attention -- intentional or otherwise, positive or negative, which has shaped public opinion about it. It includes people and events. Examples include the murder of Junko Furuta

in Japan, the "*Laglag Bala*" issue in the Philippines, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in the United States.

- The **politics** category encompasses anything and everything politics-related, which includes politicians and political events. This category sometimes overlaps with the **news** category because certain icons coexist between them. Examples include the Martial Law Crisis in Burma (Myanmar), Harry Roque, Che Guevarra, the Gunpowder Plot in Great Britain, and Kim Jong-Un.
- The **technology** category encompasses new media forms, including *social media, gadgets, video games, and general Internet culture.* This category also overlaps with **sports** in terms of eSports and entertainment because of social media. Examples include Facebook, the Cancel culture, TikTok (or *Douyin* in China), 4chan, and Internet memes.

### Subsets of Culture

We have discussed earlier that culture is a spectrum, ranging from the preserved past of folk culture to the preserved cultivation of high culture. Each of these spectra is treated as a separate entity comprising of different groups. Each group is considered as a subset of the larger spectrum. These subsets are broadly classified into three (3) groups: *subculture, counterculture, and co-cultures.*

A **subculture** is, simply put, a particular culture contained in a larger culture (sometimes referred to as its **parent culture**). This group supports the notion of exclusivity in culture because only the people with knowledge and access to these cultures can appreciate them.

- An example of folk culture is the *Aeta culture*, part of the Philippine folk subculture, which is part of a bigger collective of folk culture.
- An example of high culture is *ballet*, part of the Philippine high subculture, which is part of a bigger collective of high culture.
- An example of popular culture is the *Rico Mambo*, which is part of the Philippine popular subculture, part of a bigger collective of popular culture.

Despite the seemingly detached nature of subcultures, it is still part of a larger culture. Filipinos can identify themselves within the Philippine culture, but each Filipino embraces some specific subcultures unique to our country -- or even other subcultures outside the country's norms.

Another important subset is **counterculture**, which is formed when a certain group begins to oppose the established norms of popular culture and breaks off from the parent culture they came from. Unlike a subculture that still identifies with its parent culture, a counterculture outright rejects its origins and begins cultivating its own identity. Counterculture is often viewed as negative but not as always.

For example, in the American 1960s, a large counterculture began to spring forth from its established social norms: **hippie culture**. **Hippies** began to advocate for peace, sexual exploration and liberation, as well as the legalization of recreational drugs. The social norms they were fighting against during the 1960s in America were racism, sexism, and the Vietnam War.



Figure 2. Some tropes of the hippie culture permeate even in comics  
Source: <https://www.rappler.com/voices/pb-hippie-no-more>

Another example is **punk culture**. This music genre is a counterculture to pop music. It goes so far as to define itself differently -- from wild hairstyles to the "in-your-face" attitudes of the people who share the same idea: to stand up against authority and live life as you see fit.



Figure 3. The non-conforming nature of the punk culture is heavily reflected in their attire  
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punk\\_fashion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punk_fashion)

The last subset is the **co-culture**, defined as a subculture with which a person can affiliate themselves while existing, interacting, and negotiating within a parent culture. Much like a subculture, a co-culture can exist within a parent culture. However, it can also be a counterculture when the dominant parent culture ignores its negotiation aspect.

For example, white culture is the dominant (i.e., parent) racial culture in the United States -- it experiences the greatest cultural privilege and the most access to power and resources in society. Filipino-American (or Fil-Am) culture exists as a co-culture alongside the parent culture. The Filipino aspect in the Fil-Am culture has many of its own cultural texts and practices that differ from its parent culture. However, Filipino-Americans cannot simply express and enact their Filipino culture as they wish. Due to the power structure in American society, they must negotiate that, within white culture, sometimes conforming to their texts and practices is better than being punished or stigmatized in some way.



## Youth Culture

We have been discussing that culture is a concept that is stable through time. However, it is also a dynamic historical process. As stated earlier, the working class dictates which parts of a particular culture get to stay and which parts will go. This process is largely driven by the youth, particularly teenagers who are beginning to undergo their personal quest for self-identity -- to know their place and role in society. This process of soul-searching, which also affects the dynamics and structure of culture, is called **youth culture**. This is, to some degree, distinct from the process that parents and other adults in their community undergo.

The idea of youth culture did not come into the general vernacular throughout history -- they appear most frequently when young people experience social autonomy, where they are then expected to undergo the socialization process. Some scholars agree that the process of modern youth culture appeared after the institution of modern nation-states and after the foundation of the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The mass institutions of the nation-state have been consistent locations in which youth cultures have developed. These places, where they separate young people from adults and gather them in large numbers, are educational institutions, religious sites, workspaces, and prisons. There is some evidence suggesting that youth cultures may have existed way back during the Medieval period.

For our study, it is important to recognize that there are significant gaps in our historical understanding. The idea of popular culture could stem back during the Colonization period, where the colonizers introduced their cultures to ours, resulting in an intermingling of ideas and concepts. Youth cultures have been evident in the 20th century, particularly since the end of World War II. The history of this period is notably marked by significant social and cultural influences of youth cultures on society at large, a trend that continues in the contemporary period (Danesi, 2018).

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