3.4A: Subcultures

A subculture is a culture shared and actively participated in by a minority of people within a broader culture.

Learning Objectives

• Give examples for subcultures by using Gelder's proposed criteria

Key Points

• Subcultures incorporate large parts of the broader cultures of which they are part; in specifics they may differ radically.
• The study of subcultures often consists of the study of symbolism attached to clothing, music, and other visible affectations by members of subcultures. Sociologists also study the ways in which these same symbols are interpreted by members of the dominant culture.
• Cultural appropriation is the process by which businesses often seek to capitalize on the subversive allure of subcultures in search of “cool,” which remains valuable in the selling of any product.

Key Terms

• subculture: A portion of a culture distinguished from the larger society around it by its customs or other features.
• symbolism: Representation of a concept through symbols or underlying meanings of objects or qualities.
• cultural appropriation: Cultural appropriation is the adoption of some specific elements of one culture by a different cultural group.
In sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, a subculture is a group of people with a culture that differentiates themselves from the larger culture to which they belong. A culture often contains numerous subcultures, which incorporate large parts of the broader cultures of which they are part; in specifics they may differ radically. Subcultures bring together like-minded individuals who feel neglected by societal standards and allow them to develop a sense of identity.

**Subcultures and Symbolism**

The study of subcultures often consists of the study of symbolism attached to clothing, music, and other visible affectations by members of subcultures. Additionally, sociologists study the ways in which these symbols are interpreted by members of the dominant culture. Some subcultures achieve such a status that they acquire a name. Members of a subculture often signal their membership through a distinctive and symbolic use of style, which includes fashions, mannerisms, and argot. Examples of subcultures could include bikers, military personnel, and Star Trek fans.

Trekkies: The hand gesture meaning ‘live long and prosper’ has spread beyond the subculture of Star Trek fans and is often recognized in mainstream culture.

**Identifying Subcultures**

It may be difficult to identify certain subcultures because their style—particularly clothing and music—may be adopted by mass culture for commercial purposes. Businesses often seek to capitalize on the subversive allure of subcultures in search of “cool,” which remains valuable in selling of any product. This process of cultural appropriation may often result in the death or evolution of the subculture, as its members adopt new styles that appear alien to mainstream society.

In 2007, Ken Gelder proposed six key ways in which subcultures can be identified:

1. Through their often negative relations to work (as ‘idle’, ‘parasitic’, at play or at leisure, etc.)
2. Through their negative or ambivalent relation to class (since subcultures are not ‘class-conscious’ and don’t conform to traditional class definitions)

3. Through their association with territory (the ‘street’, the ‘hood’, the club, etc.), rather than property

4. Through their movement out of the home and into non-domestic forms of belonging (i.e. social groups other than the family)

5. Through their stylistic ties to excess and exaggeration (with some exceptions)

6. Through their refusal of the banalities of ordinary life