

Module name/ title: Notion of mainstream culture

Paper: Media and Margins

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### Component II: Description of the Module

Items	Description of Module
<b>Subject Name</b>	Media and Communication Studies
<b>Paper Name</b>	Media and Margins
<b>Module Name/Title</b>	Notion of mainstream culture
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## Notions of mainstream culture

### 1. Introduction:

With people's lives in modern capitalist societies getting increasingly defined and affected by mass media, it has become necessary to examine the mainstream culture that is being shared by the majority. One cannot however examine this without taking into consideration the inequalities that exist in terms of access to this culture and the role mass media plays wherein people are viewed as a collectivity. This implies that a need for uniform and homogenising cultural pattern through which all individuals can relate to each other. However, such is not the case. We shall see how the mainstream culture, although shared, can have variations as the level of cultural diffusion has only become faster and more intense.

### 2. Learning outcome:

- Different aspects of mainstream culture;
- Popular culture, mass culture, dominant culture, counter-cultures;
- The impact of mass media in propagating mainstream culture.

### 3. Defining Mainstream Culture:

In order to understand the concept of 'margins/marginality/marginalisation', we need to first look at what exists in the opposite spectrum. After all, those who occupy the space in the margins are those that do not do so in the mainstream and vice versa. However, defining mainstream is not that simple. The Oxford English Dictionary defines mainstream as "*The ideas, attitudes, or activities that are shared by most people and regarded as normal or conventional*". Therefore, mainstream culture would be inclusive of all cultural components that are regarded as such. However, this is easier said than done. Over the past few decades, with the cultural landscape changing rapidly due to various structural changes in society, it has become difficult to define the concept of 'mainstream'.

A 'modern' society is a multi-cultural society. Certain cultural differences offer deep insights into the values and histories of societies. We see all over how people respect or push aside the elderly, are peaceful or warlike, have many or few children, embrace different religious beliefs, and enjoy different kinds of art, music, food and sport. Although we are biologically the same but as cultural species, we have developed different ideas about what is pleasant and revolting, respectful and offensive, attractive and repulsive, right and wrong. Humans thus express their culture through differences. However, the feature of the new global society is the sharing of certain common cultural traits - tangible material culture as well as non-tangible non-material culture. This can range from mobile phones to patriotism, from fried chicken to valuing individual success, etc. This phenomenon of sharing is perpetuated by mass media especially the mainstream mass media which allows a large number of people

to collectively access, process and share a kind of information that both reflect and shape prevailing currents of thought. Thus mainstream culture will broadly include ideas, attitudes, or activities that are shared by most people and regarded as conventional; the ways the vast number of individuals relate to each other meaningfully; and the values they accept as common to one another. It will also be inclusive of perceptions which are considered as shared; which conform to their norms and help them make judgements about the behaviour and belief traits. One can identify what can be defined as mainstream by looking at the kind of symbols that are most visible and understood, the norms that are accepted as standard guidelines for appropriate behaviour, the values that are upheld and protected, the language that is spoken widely, and the material culture which is most widespread.

It is impossible to look at mainstream culture without looking into other related concepts of culture - mass, popular and dominant, especially since they are all bound up together because of mass media. Further, one needs to shed light on sub-cultures and counter-cultures as a domain where groups and individuals get to negotiate their preferences within the larger mainstream culture.

#### **4. Mainstream culture as mass culture:**

Mass culture refers to a set of cultural ideas, values, attitudes and beliefs that are a result of shared exposure of a population to the same social activities, cultural traits and tastes, mass communications media, music and art, etc. In this sense, mass culture is a product of modern communications and electronic media. It has been argued that mass culture is a product of industrialisation and urbanisation, a process that resulted in the decline of traditional community, agrarian structures, and other mediating social institutions, as well as simultaneous growth of scientific knowledge, the spread of mechanized, monotonous industrial and factory work, and the development of large cities populated by anonymous crowds. As the links between them that are contractual and erratic, mass culture plays a part here in that it becomes one of the major sources of a weak yet alternative morality. Without organizations to mediate, individuals are exposed to manipulation by core institutions of mass media and mass culture, which is developed through mass production, and marketed for profit to a mass public of consumers. It is thus, in a way, “a commercial culture, mass produced for a mass market”. Its growth means there is less space or demand for any culture which cannot make money, and which cannot be mass produced for a mass market. There could, therefore, be no mass culture without the development of a mass means of communication, as it is manufactured and distributed rather than arising from daily interactions, or rooted in distinct cultural content of a community. For instance, cultural products such as films were not necessarily mass produced in the same way as cars or television. However, the introduction of complex techniques into the making of films, the capital invested into it, and its consumption by audience made possible through cinemas meant they could now be regarded as marketable products. Thus, the movie industry along with hash tags in social media, promoting lifestyles over Facebook and Tweeter, shopping malls, smart phones, internet, are all examples of mass culture.

The concept of mass culture however has been criticised from the perspective of Critical theorists such as Theodore Adorno of Frankfurt School. Adorno used Marx’s

conception of commodity fetishism to the domain of culture. He argued that just like commodities, in general, and culture especially music, is also now produced for the market and for consumers, thus being characterised by their value for money and profit making ability, instead of their primary function. Dominic Strinati (2004) states that,

*“According to the Frankfurt School, the culture industry reflects the consolidation of commodity fetishism, the domination of exchange value and the ascendancy of state monopoly capitalism. It shapes the tastes and preferences of the masses, thereby moulding their consciousness by instilling the desire for false needs. It therefore works to exclude real or true needs alternative and radical concepts or theories, and genuinely threatening political opposition. It is so effective in doing this that people do not realise what is going on.”*

Mass is sometimes understood to be a more derogatory term reflecting a lack of taste, wherein products are undervalued or devalued for the purpose of meeting the demands of majority of the consumers unlike high culture and cannot be a genuine and authentic work. Terms like “cultured”, “high standard”, “sophisticated”, “finer things” are used to denote this. But to assume that elements of high culture are inherently superior to or more worthy than mass culture is also wrong. It’s equivalent to comparing classical music to Bollywood songs, or Beethoven to Metal, or golf to a game of darts. However, such assessment also implies that certain cultural products are not available to certain members of the society. At the same time, mass culture is not equivalent to ‘folk’ culture as they are no longer based on the people’s interactions nor is it local.

### **5. Mainstream culture as popular culture:**

In terms of definition, the term ‘popular culture’ signifies the culture that prevails in a society at a certain time. According to Delaney (2017), *“as the ‘culture of the people’, popular culture is determined by the interactions between people in their everyday activities: styles of dress, the use of slang, greeting rituals and the foods that people eat are all examples of popular culture”*. The term mass culture is regularly used as an alternate for popular culture. Despite having a lot in common, the terms are not completely interchangeable. The basic difference between the two concerns mainly the difference in means of the transmission - popular culture spreads also via direct individual to individual contact, aside from technical means while mass culture is specific through mass media. Also, mass culture is linked to a specific shared kind of content which is designed to reach as many people as possible while popular culture is more varied. However, that being said, mass culture is popular culture created by mass industry techniques and sold for the profit of mass public. Thus, the fundamental difference is the means of transmission. For example, music concerts, theatre performances or sports events can be attended by only a certain number of people yet the artists and organisers can release performances/events online, on television or on DVDs thereby causing them to become a part of mass culture. Access to popular culture therefore can be out of one’s choice or interest, and one does not have to accept the products that are offered or imposed, or those oriented on profit. Popular culture thus constitutes a certain level of participation and not mere reception.

Thus any mainstream culture in the form of popular culture can be formed from and shared through numerous sources. As mentioned, an important source is the mass media, especially popular music, film, television, computer games, books, magazines and of course the internet. In addition, we now experience this transmission through direct oral communication, i.e., cell phones. Professional and formal agencies and institutions that provide people with information such as news about scientific, academic and scholarly publications, and experts who are authorities in their field opinion are also sources of popular culture as it helps to shape and influence group and collective opinions. This aspect of popular culture is what distinguishes it from folk and high culture. Folk culture, although similar to popular culture due to mass participation, represents more static, traditional, and conservative values. As mentioned in the previous segment, high culture on the other hand is considered as culture of the elites. It falls on the opposite spectrum of mass culture as well because elements of high culture are never produced for mass consumption; it requires a certain kind of specialization which is kept exclusive to certain groups.

#### **6. Mainstream culture as dominant culture:**

Mainstream culture is a shared culture which is consumed by the majority and accepted as well. However, all mainstream culture is also a result of certain elements which are reflections of a single or few specific cultures. This is known as the dominant culture which sets the standard for the larger mainstream version. The dominant culture of a society therefore establishes its mainstream ideas, values, beliefs, preferences, norms, languages, etc. When one speaks of dominance, there is an aspect of control and coercion to it. Thus, a dominant culture is not necessarily a culture of the majority (though it often is), but rather of those who have more power and control over the resources of a society. This culture will be a reflection of dominant groups, their ideology, their interests, etc. which in turn will set the norm for rest of the society. Because societies are no longer monolithic, presence of dominant culture can lead to conflict during the process of assimilation on one hand and that of survival on the other. Issues of minority and group-differentiated rights are generally an outcome of such struggle. For instance, in most societies today, the products are usually marketed for heterosexual, young, urban, educated, able-bodied people, thus setting the pattern of what is considered common and normal. When in fact the reality is that, the market consists of consumers who are queer, older, from rural and semi-urban areas and are differently abled as well. Thus, a culture is dominant within society when that culture establishes specific standards for group behaviours. One can apply Marxist understanding of ideology in order to understand the role of dominant culture as it takes control over communication, education, legal and political institutions, art, music, religious beliefs, i.e. the superstructure as well as the economy, market, financial and various other business practices. Dominant culture is thus imposed through socialization, across various stages of exposure.

A dominant culture thus transforms into mainstream when elements of it become accepted by those that are not originally members of the same group that perpetuated those cultural traits, i.e., it is considered by a large amount of people in a society as their own. Historically, we can think of slavery, apartheid, centrality of English language, college education, a career in government services, monogamy, etc. as

examples of dominant culture which have found acceptance into the larger culture at one point of time or the other.

### 7. Mainstream culture, sub-culture and counter-culture:

Subcultures constitute a segment of the larger mainstream culture, with distinct lifestyles but are at the same time defined by it. Some subcultures are looked as less powerful versions of its dominant counterpart. In criminology, it has been analysed as a collectivity (such as a gang) which is defined by membership. For instance, members of delinquent gangs are deviants with similar aspirations as mainstream counterpart (e.g.: making money etc). Thus, they share similar goals but pursue different means. However, this is a very limited understanding especially if one were to look into a heterogeneous society with multiple and colliding value systems because people participate in multiple sub-cultural categories simultaneously. Not only that, most of us move in and out of subcultures frequently across a lifetime. In contemporary society, subcultures could include biker gangs, tattooed individuals, cosplayers, body builder, etc. Subcultures can be an important source of identity, but the relationship between subcultures and the dominant culture is often one of power, meaning the status of individuals within the dominant culture may give them the power to define aspects of the subculture through a process of labelling and this can lead to prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, though subcultures could be seen as a way through which groups in society face little opportunity to succeed within the dominant culture, but can take back some power to define their own success criteria.

Another concept that has critical importance is that of counter culture. The term was first introduced by sociologist Talcott Parsons in his classical work *The Social System*. But it was properly defined by Milton Yinger who characterized it broadly as a culture in opposition to or conflict with dominant and mainstream culture in terms of value. This is distinct from ‘sub-culture’ which tries to affirm to values of mainstream while counter culture rejects. Keith Roberts (1978) states,

*“The term counter-culture, on the other hand, might be used to refer to alternative mini cultures which make provisions for both sexes and a wide range of age groups, which are capable of influencing people over their entire life span, and which develop appropriate institutions to sustain the group in relative self sufficiency.”*

Counter culture will include deviations of sorts, whether in food, fashion, values, etc. Although history has demonstrated that at some point, counter cultures become marketable in their own way and thus commercialised. Famous examples include those of hippie culture who rejected social and sexual norms in 1960s in West; punks, survivalists who reject mainstream and “survive off-grid”, gay movement, etc.

### 8. Summary:

Mainstream culture therefore has elements of mass, dominant and popular culture. It is what majority of the members of the society consider and accept as obvious. It is, according to this majority, that the culture should be the norm, conformed to, pursued and protected. At the end of the day, all followers of this culture relate to one another through the symbols and meanings persistent with it. It serves as a means for people

to be included into the larger groups and shapes the outlook and world-view. Thus, consuming mainstream culture has elements of prestige attached to it especially within a group thereby providing opportunities to change it as well. This is why mainstream culture is constantly changing. Subcultures as a 'world within a world' present a distinct yet harmonious view of the mainstream way of life. Counter cultures on the other hand are perceived more as a threat to social order even though it might not be associated with harmful behaviour. Structural process of urbanization, industrialization and modernization has remained significant factors in creation and dissemination of mainstream culture. As our society shifts into global media influenced order, certain values have come to form the core of mainstream culture. These include freedom, democracy, material comfort and success, group opportunity, individualism, education, technological advancement to list a few. At the same time, divergent mainstream values of distinct identity assertions, leisure, sexism, ageism constantly creates tension within the larger culture system. The mass media serves as the best medium where ideas are expressed and discussed within and across the public discourse where individuals are eager to question and voice their thoughts. This also implies that a biased and ineffective mass media can lead to the formation of mainstream culture that completely pushes certain cultural groups and ideologies out of public imagination. We need to be aware of this especially because issues of the marginalized will rarely be discussed and confronted; practise of ethnocentrism is only on the rise despite the growing presence of global economy and global migration.

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