Popular Culture

Popular culture or pop culture is a term used for the culture of the people. It can be thought of as the “commercial” culture of a society because what is considered pop culture is demonstrated through production, consumption and participation. Pop culture is unique because it reflects and creates societal needs, desires, anxieties, and hopes.

Imagine for a second that something catastrophic happens on Earth and suddenly all life is decimated. There is no human or animal existence left. Aliens arrive from another planet to find the planet void of life in any recognizable state. What they find are remains of a life that once was. For something to achieve pop culture status it has to achieve popularity in the culture, be easily recognized in the culture, and be repeated across a culture. What would the aliens find that would tell them about American life and the inhabitants of Earth? What would the remains tell them about American culture and what we found important? I think the alien interpretation might be something like: The “Golden Arches” must have been a fine dining establishment, People magazine and Playboy must have been educational materials, and Wal-Mart must have been the governance system of the culture.

Pop culture serves the following purposes in society:

1. **Helps us to share identity**
   Pop culture serves as a method for people to bond together through a shared identity. Think about this: How do you identify a sports fan for a particular team? They wear team colors on sweatshirts, hats, and attend games in matching attire. Their attire shows shared identity. Watching the sports events on television gives fans something to bond over when they get together, or they can re-live the play-by-play action on television networks like ESPN, read about it in the newspaper or on the internet, and they can learn about their favorite sports players in magazines like Sports Illustrated.

2. **Guides people’s understanding of themselves**
   Pop culture helps people to understand themselves. One of the most popular sections of Barnes and Noble is the self-help section where you can learn about how to succeed in marriage, raise your self-esteem, and how to increase your sex life. Magazines like Cosmo and Jane have these nifty little quizzes about knowing if you’ve found “Mr. Right” and how to know if your boyfriend is cheating on you.

3. **Guides peoples understanding of culture**
   Pop culture helps people understand culture. Think about the last movie you saw. What cultural groups were showcased in the movie? How did they interact? How did they behave? What cultural norms did you see demonstrated? How were the men and women treated? Another way that pop culture helps people to understand culture is through music. What music do you listen to? How do the music lyrics reflect the culture you live in?

4. **Provides stories/narratives that shape identity**
   Pop culture is chock full of stories that shape the identity of people. Popular movies, best-selling novels, and even children’s fairy tales teach us gender roles, how to treat our elders,
and even how to fall in love and get married. Think of the world-wide phenomenon of
Disney and the stories you grew up hearing from the Disney perspective.

5. **Gives pleasure/fun**
   Pop culture is the stuff we indulge in for fun and pleasure. It is what we use for recreation,
   entertainment, and relaxation.

6. **Money maker/stimulates economy**
   Most of us spend a ton of money annually on products of popular culture. Look at the list of
   products below and try to figure out how much money you spend on each of those products
   cumulatively in one year. If we quit spending money on products of popular culture, just
   think of what a national financial crisis we’d push our economy into.

Some **popular products of popular culture** include:

- Internet: Google, Facebook, My Space, Amazon.com, Ebay, MSNBC.com, etc.
- Movies: Comedy, Drama, Horror, etc.
- Radio: Sirius, XM radio, FM/AM, etc.
- TV: Network, Cable, Dish, etc.
- Music: Rock, Country, Hip Hop, etc.
- Fashion: Nike, Reebok, Uggs, Levis, etc.
- Magazines: Time, People, Newsweek, etc.
- Newspapers: NY Times, Washington Post, etc.
- Pornography: Playboy, Penthouse, XXX movies, etc.
- Music Videos: MTV, CMT, etc.
- Plays, Musicals, Theater: Broadway, Disney Musicals, Shakespeare, etc.
- Literature: Novels, Poetry, Short Stories: Twilight, Harry Potter, Bible, etc.
- Arts & Crafts: Scrapbooking, knitting, etc.
- Games & Sports: NBA, NFL, Soccer, etc.

Looking at the list of pop culture products, which of them do you indulge in? Which do you financially
support? Where do you spend your time?

Now ask yourself, the following questions:

- What do those products say about our culture? What do they show is important?
- What do those products show us about gender roles in our culture? The roles of women? The
  roles of men?
- What do those products show us about equality in our culture? Who are the “haves” and the
  “have not’s” in our culture?
- What do those products show us about what is valued in our culture?