



## YouTube and Global Popular Culture

This **Sociology Factsheet** will look at YouTube and global popular culture and explore the issues related to the power of YouTube, the arguments for and against a global popular culture, and the extent to which it is an important factor of media and globalisation. The Factsheet includes **Exam Hints** to help you to use your knowledge to gain maximum marks, while the **activities** give you the opportunity to apply what you have learned and will help you develop your skills in this area.

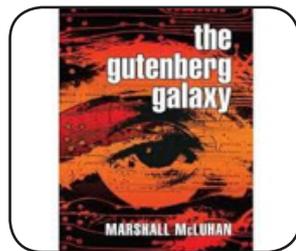
Words in **bold** are explained in the glossary and a reference list is included at the end of the Factsheet.

**The examiner will expect you to be able to:**

1. Demonstrate your understanding of global popular culture, and the part YouTube plays.
2. Demonstrate your understanding of the consequences of a global popular culture
3. Critically evaluate differing theories and research on this topic.
4. Be confident in incorporating examples and illustration in an exam response.

### Introduction

In 1962 Marshall McLuhan in his book ***The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*** argued, as a consequence of what he saw as the rapid speed of technological change that the world is becoming a **global village**.



**Popular culture** is linked to, and consumed by the masses. Examples include: Reality TV, soap operas, social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, tabloid newspapers, radio 1 etc. It is generally commercialised and may not last for a long period of time (unlike high culture).

These **cultural products** are made to be sold to a mass global market, to make a profit for large media organisations. There is a sense of inferiority attached to these cultural products – sometimes referred to as **low culture**. It is though, everyday culture and fills most of our days.

**High culture** as opera, theatre, ballet, art galleries, good literature etc. It has links with, and is consumed predominantly by the elite classes, and is generally expensive.

**Activities:** Do some research into the cost of tickets to see an opera, ballet or play either near to where you live, or in London. What is the average cost, and compare this to cinema tickets?

On a given day, see if you can list how many popular cultural products you consume (television, radio, websites, magazines, films etc).

Popular culture is seen as un-challenging entertainment, as it is designed to reach mass audiences to make a profit. It requires little critical thought, unlike, for example, an opera. Popular culture is being spread across the globe, so audiences are global and vast.

**Activity:** Make a list of the benefits and drawbacks of popular culture becoming global.

**Activity:** What do you understand by this term? Write a paragraph explaining what you think it means.

At the heart of the notion of the global village is the concept of **globalisation** – which refers to the growing connectedness of societies and cultures across the world – trade, consumer goods, popular culture. Put simply, the world appears to be getting smaller, in the light of improvements in travel, media and technology.

We are all now used to watching television programmes made in the US. Music, films and websites too. Just because we live in the UK does not mean we cannot know what life is like in the US.

### YouTube

YouTube can be considered a popular cultural product, and is a US video-sharing and hosting platform based in California. Created by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim in February 2005. It was bought by Google in November 2006 for \$ 1.65 billion. It now operates as one of Google's subsidiaries. Users can upload, view, rate, share, add to playlists, report, comment on videos and subscribe to other users. There is a wide range of content available: video clips, TV show clips, music videos, short and documentary films, audio recordings, film trailers, live streams etc., Most content is



uploaded by individuals, but media corporations such as CBS, BBC, Vevo, Hulu offer material. YouTube and selected creators earn advertising revenue from Google AdSense. In August 2017 it was ranked the second most popular site, just behind Google. As of May 2019, more than 500 hours of video content was uploaded every minute. It is quite clearly a huge organisation.

**Activity:** Can you find out the number of users of YouTube and how users are distributed throughout the world?

Think about the power YouTube has, given the size and reach it has. Write a short paragraph on your thoughts on this.

YouTube, like every other cultural product, was set up to make money, and a great deal of money, as illustrated by the case study above. However, it is the power it has, that is not necessarily financial, that is also important.

**Terry Flew (2002)** argues that the onset of new media technologies, including the internet have played a key role in the development of a global popular culture. This argument is hard to deny, it is also clear to see how a big global website like YouTube plays a part in this.

**Douglas Kellner (1995)** suggests that the media has the power to produce representations of lifestyles that become part of our everyday lives and help people to find their own identities and views of the world.

This global culture, however, is American. So, the lifestyles and views of the world that Kellner talks about are therefore American – YouTube is American owned.

This can sometimes be referred to as **Americanisation**.

**Activity:** Do some research into exactly what Americanisation is, and write up a short report, with examples.

An issue that arises as a consequence of globalisation and Americanisation is the undermining of local and national cultures. This means that as cultural products (mostly American) are sold and consumed across the globe, they become embedded in the ways of life of cultures all over the world. This erodes local and national cultures, and the merging of cultures causing them to lose their uniqueness, and this is known as **cultural homogenisation**.

**Leslie Sklair (2012)** argues that the predominantly American-based media spread information, ideas, news, entertainment and popular culture to a global market. However, the media blur the differences between information, entertainment and promotion of products and sell this across the globe. Ideologically this is presented as a happy and satisfying consumerist American or Western lifestyle. This then has the consequence of the acceptance of dominant American/Western capitalist ideology. Sklair calls this the **culture-ideology of consumerism**.

**Activity:** Think about Sklair's argument above, and the concept of 'culture-ideology consumerism' and write down your thoughts on the following:

The narrowing of global cultures, so that they become American and/or Western.

The notion of this global culture being capitalist ideologically and the impact this might have on non-capitalist cultures.

Where you stand on all of this.

Western companies like Microsoft and Google (who own YouTube) have dominated the growth of the internet, which helps spread the same Western culture-ideology of consumerism.

**How does YouTube help to spread a Western culture-ideology of consumerism?**

**George Ritzer (2008)** in his work **The McDonaldisation of Society** argues that companies and brands are operating on a global scale, which promotes a global culture and facilitates consumer lifestyles – at the same time weakening local cultures. He argues that the big global brands: Google, Apple, Microsoft, McDonalds, Coca Cola, Starbucks, Nike etc., use global media to promote and market their products on a global stage. Their logos are instantly recognisable.



When we log onto YouTube, in the majority of cases before we can watch a video, we are required to watch an advertisement.

**Activity:** Do this now, log on to YouTube to watch a video, and see what advertisement comes up.

After logging on, also check out 'What is popular right now?' And 'Today's funniest clips'. Do some analysis of this, what is the country of origin of the products being advertised? What is the country of origin of the 'What is popular' and 'Today's funniest clips'? How many views have these clips had globally? Then write up a report on this.

**Exam Hint:** The information in the report you write up, can be used in an exam response. Using contemporary examples in your answer will show good sociological awareness.

It is clear that advertising on YouTube is contributing to what Sklair refers to as the culture-ideology of consumerism, because it is absolutely unavoidable.

**Activity:** Keep a log over a week of every time you log onto YouTube, listing all of the advertisements that you cannot avoid. Categorise the advertisements by country of origin of products, and decide if they are leading to Americanisation/ Westernisation?

The fact that American and Western cultural values are being fed to non-Western cultures and therefore undermining local cultures is referred to as **cultural imperialism**. And when the media and particularly new media are involved in spreading these ideologies it is referred to as **media imperialism**. It can be argued that YouTube contributes to both cultural and media imperialism.

According to a website the top of the list of the biggest YouTube brand deals, at number 1 is: Mystery Guitar Man and Rhett and Link, who were sponsored by Coca Cola and McDonalds. Both of which are American global brands.

<https://newmediarockstars.com/2012/12/the-7-biggest-youtube-brand-deals/>

## Theoretical perspectives

### Pluralism

**John Tomlinson (1999)** argues from a pluralist perspective that globalisation does not involve the direct imposing of culture from the Western world, instead there is a mixing of cultures or **hybridisation**. Individuals can choose by drawing on Western or their own local cultures. For him, this increased choice facilitates different cultural styles, whereby a range of local and Westernised cultural influences are combined into new **hybrid cultures**. From this perspective – new media and websites such as YouTube allow consumers to make and distribute their own media products and so they generate their own popular culture, as opposed to being the passive recipients of large Western media corporations.



### Marxism

As expected, Marxists take a completely opposing stance to pluralists. Rather than global media leading to more choice and empowering the audience/consumer, they see the opposite. For these theorists the globalisation of popular culture is of most benefit to media owners e.g. Google and YouTube, as it leads to huge profits from advertising. For **Daya Kishan Thussu (2007)** the globalisation of television and competition between media conglomerates for audiences and advertising, has led to television news across the world becoming **tabloidised**, or more entertaining, he refers to this as **global infotainment**. This both informs and entertains, with an emphasis on entertainment, at the expense of reporting public affairs. This is, he argues, US style infotainment and is accompanied by the promotion of a false global 'feelgood factor' based on American consumerist lifestyles. Thussu then suggests that this diverts our attention away from more serious issues such as global inequality. For Marxists, this facilitates an ideology within consumers of passivity, rendering them less likely to challenge dominant ideas.

### Postmodernism

For postmodernists such as **Jean Baudrillard (1987)** we live in a 'media-saturated society', whereby we are dominated by media imagery, which distorts the way we see the world. We have lost touch with the 'real', as everything that we know comes from the media. So, though we might have never been to a city like New York, we feel as if we know exactly what New York is like, through the media.

Postmodernists suggest that the media no longer reflects reality, it actually creates it.

For Baudrillard, in this media-saturated world, we identify more with the media imagery than we do with our own everyday experiences. Social media sites are a good example of this, as we engage with 'friends' we hardly know, or identify with characters on television or sites such as YouTube.

### Conclusion

Western companies have dominated the growth of the internet and clearly continue to have an influence on non-Western cultures which is leading to a growing connectedness of societies and cultures across the world, Popular culture is being spread across the globe, so audiences are global and vast. Cultures throughout the world may be changing as a result of the growth of the internet.

**Exam Hint:** There has been a great deal of terminology used in this Factsheet. When using terms and concepts in the exam e.g. hyperreality, ensure that you know what they mean. It is really important that if you are using terms and concepts you understand them. This demonstrates to the examiner, your sociological knowledge.

**Exam Hint:** Read back through the three theoretical perspectives: Pluralism, Marxism and Postmodernism, and evaluate them in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. It is essential in the exam to achieve higher marks that you are able to evaluate.

**Exam Hint:** It is highly unlikely that you will get an exam question specifically on 'YouTube' and global popular culture. However, the information in this Factsheet could provide good examples, theory and research to use for questions on the topic of Media.

#### 1. How does the media contribute to a global popular culture?

To answer this question, you could use YouTube as an example, along with other global websites. Plus, concepts such as Americanisation, cultural homogenisation, cultural imperialism, and various theoretical perspectives.

#### 2. Media and/or cultural imperialism is a threat to cultural identities in many developing countries. Evaluate this view.

To answer this question, again you could use YouTube as an example, along with further examples of global websites, plus other media conglomerates output. Similar concepts could be included as mentioned in the question above and competing theoretical perspectives.

## References

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## Glossary

**Americanisation:** The influence of American culture on other countries/cultures.

**Cultural homogenisation:** Where the characteristics of cultures are erased and blended, to become one uniform culture.

**Cultural imperialism:** Western and/or American cultural values being imposed on non-Western cultures, therefore undermining local cultures.

**Cultural products:** The television programmes, films, magazines, radio programmes, websites etc., produced by a country.

**Globalisation:** The growing connectedness of societies and cultures across the world, trade, consumer goods and popular culture.

**Global village:** The rapid speed of technological change, and the mass media operating on a global scale makes the world appear to shrink.

**Global infotainment:** The dumbing down of cultural products, to ensure a global audience.

**High culture:** Opera, theatre, ballet, art galleries, good literature etc. It has links with the elite classes and is generally expensive.

**Hybrid cultures:** A new culture formed from a mix of two or more other cultures, a fusing of cultures.

**Hybridisation:** A mixing of cultures, when aspects of two or more cultures combine.

**Hyperreality:** The media creating a distorted view of real events that bear no resemblance to the real world.

**Low culture:** Everyday culture of the masses e.g. soap-operas, usually carries a derogatory connotation, and thought of as inferior culture compared to high culture.

**Media imperialism:** Western and/or American cultural values being forced on non-Western cultures.

**Popular culture:** Cultural products enjoyed by the masses.

**Simulacra:** Artificial images or copies of real events that bear no resemblance to the real world.

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