

Differences Between Popular and Folk Culture

What are some examples of the distinctions between popular and folk culture? Consider the following:

- Popular culture comprises the means via which large, heterogeneous masses of people identify themselves, for example by conformity to certain types of dress, ways of speaking, modes of behavior, music preferences, etc.;
- The norms of popular culture are highly individualistic and constantly changing — they allow adherents to continually update or redefine themselves by the culture aspects they adopt, maintain, modify, or reject;
- There are strong commercial interests in popular culture. Folk-culture objects give way to their popularized "equivalents" which are more quickly or cheaply produced and more profitable;
- Consuming these "popular culture products" often enhances prestige as well as identity — whether via certain types of music, dress, hairstyle, dialect or jargon, etc.
- Popular culture is often transmitted by mass media such as books, films, television, large public gatherings (rock concerts, mass sports events, etc.) and is usually not location-specific.
- One's "identity" within popular, mass culture is usually flexible and even vague, with a wide range of possible social roles which one may define individually within the broad cultural norm. Popular culture identity is seldom restricted to any particular environment (including national environments).

In turn, folk culture might be characterized as follows:

- Folk culture comprises people (and objects, etc.) who represent or maintain a "traditional" mode of life — who live in an old-fashioned way or with a simpler life-style which is not (or no longer) "popular" (at least in the modern, "mass" sense prevailing in a particular society);
- Folk culture is usually rural, cohesive, conservative, and largely self-sufficient. There is often a strong family or clan structure and highly developed family, religious, or general community rituals;
- Tradition is paramount — change comes infrequently and slowly
- Individualism is subordinate to traditional community standards and values;
- Commercialization is not characteristic of folk culture, although aspects of folk culture may be co-opted or copied and popularized (and thus commercialized) by mass culture.
- Folk culture may combine folk and nonfolk elements. Such may be either (or both) material and nonmaterial:
 - Material culture includes all objects or "things" made and used by members of a particular cultural group — material elements are concrete, and visible
 - Nonmaterial culture, including folklore, is largely comprised of "oral tradition," including folktales, folksongs, folkdance, folklore, folk beliefs, superstitions, and customs. Other aspects of nonmaterial culture include dialects, religions, and particular "worldviews."
- Folk culture is usually transmitted interpersonally within the relatively small, cohesive, homogeneous society in question; and is often confined to that particular environment;
- The "identity" of members of a folk society is usually fixed and inflexible, with clearly-defined role expectations

Other Distinctions Between Popular and Folk Culture

As noted above, Humanists consider folk culture to be a subset of popular culture. Social scientists often do not include folk culture in their definition of "popular culture", except to the extent that aspects of it have been co-opted and "popularized" by mass culture.

One might conclude the following about the relationship between folk and popular culture:

- Popular culture is individualistic, flexible as to identity, constantly-changing, broadly-spread, commercial in nature, and wide-ranging in both scope and appeal.
- Folk culture is traditional, relatively inflexible and resistant of change, local in orientation, non-commercial, and limited in the appeal of its authentic, original form to "outsiders" of the particular society;
- Popular culture always challenges folk culture; seldom does it happen in reverse;
- Popular culture undermines folk culture; seldom the reverse;
- Popular culture often appropriates elements of folk culture. Folk culture *may* appropriate elements of the larger popular culture around it, though this is less frequent, usually less-visible, and usually by reason of *force majeure*;
- Popular culture markets those elements of folk culture which it has co-opted and "popularized"; this usually results in the gradual disappearance of the "original" forms of the folk culture elements.

Characteristics of Mass Popular Culture

"Mass" popular culture (films, recordings, popular literature, television programming, and other large 'mediated' events), has been described by Emeritus Professor Bill Stott of UT-Austin as follows (Spring 2004):

- Popular culture is by nature commercially successful, self-sustaining and self-perpetuating: it pays for itself;
- Popular culture produces masses of spectator-participants who form a community of 'believers' or 'adherents' to the culture they are consuming;
- Participation in such communities can have a powerful identity role, rivalling that of racial or ethnic group membership.
- Certain forms of popular culture are characteristic only of certain racial or ethnic (or even religious, etc.) groups. Participating in the culture reinforces one's identity within that group;
- Popular culture celebrates the people who are experiencing it;
- Popular culture is the "glue" which binds members of a common society;
- Popular culture can be revolutionary in effect, though often unintentionally;
- Popular culture is always looking for the "new" (cf. the emphasis on "newness" and "freedom" in advertising);
- However, the "new" cannot be really new — this is instead the function of art. Popular audiences would not understand totally new artifacts. [This explains why popular culture so often co-opts material from folk culture.]

Why Is U.S. Popular Culture So Successful Worldwide? (cf. [American Popular Culture and Globalization](#))

Why are some 80% of all films worldwide either made or produced in the U.S.? Why is American popular music so popular globally? Apart from factors like availability and pricing, the following are also relevant:

- Most U.S. popular culture is produced in English, which is not only understood globally, but itself often has a popular status identification in countries where it is not the native language. The ability to participate in English-language culture itself may lend status. The consumption of popular culture from English-speaking countries like the U.S. allows one to identify oneself with what that culture "means" for that person.
- Both the creators of U.S. popular culture and its audiences have a hybrid vigor, representing highly multicultural elements. Just as the U.S. population is comprised of people from almost all other countries on the globe, so can people from almost any other country find something in U.S. popular culture which is to them familiar — with which they can identify;
- A corollary of this is that, being highly multicultural, U.S. popular culture has a broad appeal to the emerging "global culture" (as distinct from any one of its components);
- The promise of popular culture is individual happiness, which also is the focus of American society — e.g. "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It is thus not a surprise that popular culture material which celebrates individualism and happiness originates in the U.S.