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## A Critical Analysis of Pop Culture and Media

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**Abstract:** Studies have revealed that in the age of digital media, popular culture has emerged as a powerful phenomenon. With this in mind, this article critically examines how media is the key player in promoting and reinforcing popular culture. Further, it illuminates the cultural shift with urbanization and industrial progress. In this regard, available literature of the past twenty years has been critically reviewed. This piece of research confers different sources of popular culture such as movies, TV programs, online video gaming, politics, music, sports, advertisements, e-commerce, and mobile applications and describes the significant role of the media in popularizing and endorsing it. This study concludes that the media has played a significant role in cultural change and that the media and pop culture are inter-reliant. This study also suggests that popular culture has a significant influence and power that can be helpful for agenda setting and cultural diplomacy. Pop culture is dynamic and the media plays a crucial role in promoting popular culture.

**Key Words:** Culture, Popular Culture, Sources of Pop-Culture, Media

### Introduction

The terrain of the research exploring the relationship between media and society is expanding. It has become an irrefutable reality that the proliferation of media in our lives is unavoidable. As such every sphere of life and every aspect of society is under the great influence of media. Being a part of the mediatized world, our whole way of life has transformed and is still under transition. This whole way of life is called culture (Kraidy, 2019). Ushanova (2015) argued that in our mediatized world, the media plays an extremely important role in shaping culture and society. Similarly, Hepp et al. (2010) argue that this is a media-saturated society where the media is influential from the individual to societal level and has become part of the fabric of culture. In this vein, ample research

has highlighted different areas of life (from daily life to fashion, sports, agriculture, online marketing, tourism, showbiz, etc.) which are dependent on, and under the influence of the media (See e.g., Hutchins, 2011; Kang & Kim, 2017; Kim & Ko, 2010; Leung et al., 2013; Morris & James, 2017; Šerić & Praničević, 2018; Shefrin, 2004; Singh et al., 2018). Research has also explored the different dimensions of the evolving relationship between media and society that consequently leads to cultural change.

Considering the previous scholarship, the role of media in pop culture is an intriguing area in the field of culture and media. The importance of the field demands more discussion and exploration in this area. This article specifically focuses on Popular Culture (Pop Culture) and takes a new look at the

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relationship between pop culture and media. This review article explains what culture is and recounts the segregation of cultures like High, folk, and Pop culture alongside cultural paradigm shifts following the industrial revolution, which lead to a better understanding of (the emergence of) Popular Culture. The current study examines different mediatized sources of popular culture like movies, TV programs, online video gaming, politics, music, sports, advertisements, e-commerce, and mobile apps to describe the significant role of media in promoting and formulating pop culture. This study further provides future insights to show the importance and power of popular culture and the crucial role of media.

### **Theory of Mediatization**

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This research is related to the role of media in social and cultural change, which correlates with the theory of mediatization. The theory of mediatization argues that social institutions are going through a transition under the influence of media logic. Politics, society, and the media industry itself have changed and become dependent on media ([Nie et al., 2014](#)). Initially, this theory was used to understand the relationship between media and politics (Asp, 1986; as cited in [Nie et al., 2014](#)). At that time the media was instrumentalized by the politicians and driven by political logic, however, currently, this is the media logic's age as [Jansson \(2002\)](#) outlines, the role of media has increased in society. The culture was a social decision taken by the masses of the society but now is determined significantly by the media. Thus, the media is not merely a medium or carrier but also a provider of cultural products and beliefs. Likewise, [Ushanova \(2015\)](#) describes the theory of mediatization as a continuous process of social change just like individualization and globalization. According to the researcher, the theory is still at a fledgling stage but has gained recognition in the international community of communication studies. Mediatization shapes and constitutes modernity, and enlightens social and cultural change in the settings of media change.

### **Methodology**

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This research is qualitative as it is narrative, descriptive, interpretive, and critical without any numerical analysis. Qualitative research gives relaxation for the researcher's predisposition as [Cresswell \(2003\)](#) posits that qualitative research is interpretative research where researchers make interpretations according to their personality, background, history, and personal understanding. Review articles are a major part of qualitative research. For this review article, available research of the previous twenty years has been critically reviewed keeping in view the contents and framework of the article, and then synthesized as an integrative review. Explaining integrative review [Torraco \(2005\)](#) posits that previous research is critically reviewed and synthesized to create new knowledge and perspectives on the topic. Torraco further maintains that the objectives and products of an integrative review are new ideas and viewpoints for the field of research. Hence, the objective of this research is to create new perspectives on the topic that would take the researchers to new knowledge and ideas for further research in the field.

### **Understanding Pop-Culture**

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We can better understand Popular Culture if we are conceptually clear about what is culture? Culture has been defined in many ways through different perspectives taking into account socio-geographical and normative considerations. For example, Kuper (2001) outlines different notions of culture e.g., the romantic German notion of "Kultur" deals with spirituality, language, and national identity while in terms of the French enlightenment, culture is a search for excellence and progress in universal terms. In contrast, British social views about culture revolve around the tension between high and low, elite and working-class. The American notion explains culture as a whole way of life. There are different understandings of culture ([Storey, 2021](#)). [Spencer-Oatey \(2021\)](#) posits that culture is an ambiguous collection of traditions, standards, life dimensions, beliefs, and social contracts which are shared by people collectively and affect an individual's behavior and the way of understanding other

people's behaviors. Combining several definitions in another study, [Spencer-Oatey \(2012\)](#) describes the features of culture. Spenser-Oatey claims that culture consists of different layers. It is a gradual process that can be learned at the individual and social levels. This is a whole way of life that includes so many things like routine life activities, living styles, traditions, values, food, means of entertainment, etc. and just as importantly can be associated with gender, age, ethnicity, organizational affiliations, and national identity.

In a society, culture can be segregated mainly into three parts which are known as high culture, folk culture, and pop- culture (popular culture). High culture consists of the texts and practices considered elite or of the highest class. Practices like opera, horse racing, ballet, golf, artworks in galleries, and texts like works of Shakespeare, are included in high culture. High culture is adopted by and affordable to the specific elite segments of society ([Delaney, 2007](#)). In the same line, [Debnath \(2019\)](#) claims, "High culture is a collection of ideologies, beliefs, thoughts, trends, practices, and works--intellectual or creative--that is intended for refined, cultured and educated elite people" (p.274). Whereas folk culture is regional, local, rural and simple culture. It is also conservative ([Delaney, 2007](#)) because innovation and new trends are not encouraged in folk culture. It passes through generations and stays constant, for example, traditional food, regional traditions, dress, folk music, etc. Two factors are common between high and folk culture that both are produced and consumed at a specifically limited scale by the elite and subordinate class respectively. Extricating folk culture and pop culture, Nestor García-Canclini (1995; as cited in [Kraidy, 2019](#)) argues that cultural developments do not hurt traditional culture and traditional culture does not represent popular culture.

Popular Culture that is also called "pop culture" (Zhi'ang,1999; as cited in [Kraidy, 2019](#)), has been complex to understand throughout its definitional voyage. It has been intermingled with folk culture for decades but with time and after the amount of research in the field, pop culture now has its separate identity and definitional map.

Popular culture is a culture that is used by the public at the mass level. [Storey \(2021\)](#) pens that popular culture is the culture that is well-liked and accepted by major segments of society. Similarly, focusing on American fast-food chains, [Febrina \(2019\)](#) theorizes that American pop culture is reputed due to the production of famous products e.g., their food chains like McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and KFC. Further, in the same vein, [Crossman \(2019\)](#) underlines that the term "Popular Culture" was coined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it includes the products which are expended by the major part of the society e.g., music, art, literature, fashion, dance, film, cyberculture, television, etc. The researcher further adds that sometimes pop culture is instrumentalized by the powerful entities to suppress the common masses to achieve their objectives. However, Stuart Hall (1998; as cited in [Kraidy, 2019](#)) from the British school of thought on class system views popular culture exclusively as a constant counterforce against the dominant culture.

The industrial revolution caused the emergence of pop culture. Many scholars take pop culture as a product of industrialization and urbanization. For example, according to [Parker \(2011\)](#), there can be different definitions of pop culture but one thing is certain, it emerged right after industrialization and urbanization. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the industrial revolution changed the social horizon drastically and initiated urbanization and technological growth. In the run towards innovation and progress, people started migrating from rural to urban areas. This was the paradigm shift from folk culture to pop culture. People from different rural areas with different backgrounds started living together and following things in common to live life. These circumstances gave birth to commercialization, mass production-mass consumption, and formed a commercial and corporate social culture. Popular culture is a social glue for the people of the same interest and is driven by the corporate sector for profit-making objectives ([Dolby, 2003](#)). [Kraidy \(2019\)](#) also describes popular culture as an outcome of late capitalism and a product of industrialization used to re-educate people to be fitted into the capitalistic model of economics. It is not

static; rather it is a continuous and dynamic process. As such pop culture can be explained in multiple ways. It is a culture that is mass-produced, mass-consumed, and well-liked by society. It also presents a cultural tussle between the high and low classes. It serves the corporate sector and is a need to survive in capitalism.

### Sources of Pop-Culture

Mass media is a driving force and with the invention of digital media, it has become more impactful and powerful. There was a radical change in culture after mass media and technological developments in communication modes. The media has constituted and promoted culture. Our lives are significantly dependent on media and so is culture. Increasing dependency on media has led to mediatized culture like print, graphic, audiovisual and digital mediatization. Media use is closely linked with social change and formulates pop culture. The culture that is dependent on media is referred to as mediatized culture (Fornäs, 2014). Hence, sources of pop culture dependent on media can be called "mediatized sources of pop culture". These sources are the veridical examples of pop culture which are mass-produced, mass-consumed, commercialized, and highly adopted and liked by the major segment of society. Considering the level of dependency of pop culture on media, these mediatized sources of pop culture are inevitable to discuss to irradiate how media is formulating and promoting pop culture. Mediatized sources of pop culture are films, TV programs, online gaming, politics, music, sports, advertisements, e-commerce, and mobile applications.

### Films

Films have played a decisive role in the growth of popular culture. They are widely produced and watched at the national and international levels with huge impact and reach in various social spheres. People with different demographics started living together and following the speech, dressing style, and behavior of their common heroes on the silver screen (Libraries, 2010). Rose

(2007) argued, that though movies are not reliable sources of knowledge, they still can be helpful in teaching and understanding certain biological concepts like animal evolution, cloning, genetics, etc. Movies can also change perception, for example, Febrina (2019) articulated that America highlighted a few characters in Japanese adapted movies that changed the perception of the masses towards characters. For instance, *Hachi* (A loyal dog) influenced the perception regarding dogs and many products depicted loyal dogs in marketing later. *Godzilla* was also presented as an American character and perceived as a savior of the Americans. Movies are also impactful and powerful tools of propaganda as Elezaj (2019) recounted, movies had been used and instrumentalized politically, socially, and economically; for instance, Adolf Hitler used movies as propaganda tools in the second world war. He further stated that movies form culture, teach history, create awareness and also inspire. Exploring the cultural impact of cinematic media Naeem et al. (2020) argue that Hollywood movies are causing cultural imperialism. These movies not only promote western culture in Pakistan but also have substantial effects on the attitude and moral values of Pakistani youth. Similarly, in another article Jones (2018) described socially impactful movies with their subjects e.g., *Crazy Rich Asians* highlighted the issue of representation and class system, *Green Book* highlighted the issue of racism, *A Private War* highlighted the issue of war, *Shoplifters* highlighted the issue of poverty, *Three Identical Strangers* highlighted the issue of medical ethics and mental health, *The Hate You Give* highlighted police misconduct, *Black Panther* highlighted colonialism and technology. Few movies can be highly impactful in real life as the movie *Fight Club*, released in 1999 caused a rapid increase in real-life fight clubs not only in the USA but across international borders and gave birth to Moscow and Thai fight club circuits. The movie *Day after tomorrow* made people concerned about the issue of global warming. The movie *Super-Size Me* caused the backlash to fast food and McDonald's had to close their "Super-Size Me" offer (Platt College, n.d.). Animated films are also a major

part of the industry. Children and adults both enjoy animated movies as these movies depict imagination and fairy tales that give a sense of possibilities and positivity. There are millions of subscribers of digital media platforms like Netflix, Disney+, HBO Max, and Amazon Prime Video to watch films and movie seasons that make them pop culture.

### **TV Programs**

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TV programs are a major source of pop culture. They include morning shows, dramas, political talk shows, reality TV shows, cooking shows, fashion shows, etc. TV programs are great influencers in national and international media ([Coban, 2016](#)). Panama Leaks hype was created by the media. A plethora of media and political discourse was produced. Every political talk show was discussing it until it resulted in the ending of many political regimes and shook the political world. Reality TV has also emerged powerfully. [Yang \(2014\)](#) described reality TV shows as real people shows, in which real people exhibit their skills to the viewers. Giving the example of the reality singing show *Super Voice Girl (SVG)* [Zhao \(2018\)](#) concludes that reality TV shows can influence and support national politics, ideology, economy, and policymaking. *SVG* presented the concept of queer and differentiated it from Lesbian, which was accepted by the entertainment industry. Reality TV shows like *The Voice*, *America's Got Talent*, *Dance India Dance*, and *India Got Talent* create heroes from zero and have massive viewership. Cooking shows modify and enhance our food culture whereas fashion shows highlight and shape dressing trends prevailing in societies. TV dramas are also significantly impactful on culture. Turkish drama *Ertugrul Ghazi* is a supreme example of popular culture with transnational viewership. Pakistani dramas are also having a noticeable impact on national culture.

### **Online Gaming**

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With technological developments, digital media promoted real-life experiences in the shape of online games. A video game is an electronic game that is played on devices like PCs and mobile phones. [Reid \(2014\)](#) claims

that video games have become a part of pop culture in this advanced age. Players play online games because they receive rewards and self-respect after achievements that make them feel productive. Online gaming is very popular among youth. For example, [Seok & Dacosta \(2012\)](#) outlined that 75% of South Korean youth are online gaming addicted. The video gaming industry largely expanded in the last two decades ([Biegun et al., 2021](#)). A report by Entertainment Software Association (2021) points out that only in America, 227 million people play video games from different age and gender groups which increased amid Covid-19. [Richter \(2020\)](#) underlines that in 2019, the gaming industry's revenue was \$145.7b leaving behind the Box office and music industry with \$42.5b and \$20.2b revenue respectively. In 2020, the total revenue of the PC game industry was \$37b and that of the mobile gaming industry was \$77b just in the USA ([Clement, 2021](#)). Plenty of research is available on the psychological effects of video gaming and health hazards, as well as the benefits of the evolution of gaming. The scale of consumption and statistics enlightens online gaming as pop culture.

### **Politics**

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[Street \(2020\)](#) claims that the relationship between pop culture and politics is historical. Relating to the recent past, he gives the example of Trump that was presented as a rock star by the pop culture from Hollywood to the wrestling arena. Imran Khan from Pakistan and Boris Johnson from the UK were the same cases. According to [Kraidy \(2019\)](#), In popular culture, the media is used as an instrument by power blocks and politicians. People follow politicians and political parties like fans follow their stars from showbiz. At the domestic level, politicians use emotional rhetoric like nationalism in media to have their objectives accomplished. It also promotes political activism. Play cards with different slogans are the perfect examples of the phenomenon. According to [Coban \(2016\)](#), In international politics, numerous news agencies are playing their role in making international relations. The media plays an important role in foreign policy amassing audiences on major subjects like war, peace,

and diplomacy. In this age of social media, nationally and internationally, every political party and politician is reaching the masses through FB pages and Twitter handles, etc. They have social media cells to propagate and set agendas. Digital media comparatively provides better platforms to politicians in terms of reach and effectiveness evaluation. Abundant political accounts are being operated officially and unofficially. Being well-liked, massively consumed, and vastly accessed through media; politics also forms a significant part of pop culture.

## **Music**

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Music is one of the fast-growing industries in the world. The singers are celebrities and media influencers. [Hollander \(2010\)](#) explained this celebrity cult phenomenon as part of pop culture that emerged with the death of Michael Jackson which outshined the other programs and news stories for days. Hollander further claims that in the light of modernity, current music is a blend of several genres that is taken as an element of a shared culture. Hollywood singers are recognized across the borders with millions of fans and followers on social media. The acceptance of singers from one culture or geographical region to another is a popular source of cultural exchange (for example English singers in Bollywood and vice versa and also Pakistani singers singing for Bollywood). Music has vast consumption and has become an international source of entertainment that makes it a source of popular culture. There are so many music websites and applications such as YouTube, bestsongs.pk, Patari, Deezer, Sound clouds, Spotify, etc.

## **Sports**

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When entertainment is a source of culture, sports share a big part of it. Many major sports events are ranked in popular culture because they are watched and followed by millions of the followers such as the world cups and Olympics. Diverse international masses from different regions watch and access such mega-events through mass media ([Delaney, 2007](#)). In an article [Baker \(2020\)](#) illuminated that Cricket World Cup 2019 hosted by England was watched by 2.6 billion viewers

that putting that event on the list of most-watched sports events in history. The international community consumes sports at a vast level, for instance, according to FIFA (2018), during the FIFA world cup 2018 in Russia, 130 million fans used FIFA's official website and Apps and 120 million individuals followed FIFA on social media pages. Highlighting the acceleration of media sports culture [Hutchins \(2011\)](#) argued that in this digital age a huge number of players use Twitter and other massaging platforms to stay in touch with their fans and social circle instantly. This high-scale consumption shows that sports are a part of popular culture.

## **Advertisements**

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As mentioned above, popular culture is also about commercialization. It has a process of production, consumption, and reproduction. In the age of marketing, advertising has a supreme place in accelerating this process. Advertisements are the blood of media in terms of revenue generation. This is known to be the most powerful tool of promotion and persuasion. People are influenced by advertising and it also brings about new trends in society and in turn causes cultural evolution. As mentioned earlier, the British notion of pop culture is based on class differences and the struggle for compatibility. It urges the lower class to compete with the upper class. Advertisements motivate individuals to be compatible in society. For example, an ideal body image for women is presented as thin is beautiful, which then fosters body dissatisfaction. Advertisements urge women to reshape their bodies using different products ([Bloom Ads, 2021](#)). With globalization, multinational advertising has approached the market as commercialization has also increased. Multinational corporations produce at a mass level and then advertise on the international level for transnational consumption. Such advertising has noticeable effects on culture. A study by [Ochonogor & Nwachukwu \(2019\)](#) concluded that the advertising campaign of Coca-Cola influenced the youth of Nigeria by changing their partialities in routine life. Numerous advertising campaigns, hundreds of ads, and enormous consumption make advertisement a crucial part of pop culture.

## **E-Commerce**

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[Efendioglu & Yip \(2004\)](#) argue that with the expansion of internet connectivity there is growth and acceptance of E-Commerce. E-Commerce has emerged as a rapidly growing popular culture in the international arena, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when markets were closed to maintain social distance, many a merchant and shopkeeper shifted their businesses online which then accelerated E-commerce ([Bhatti et al., 2020](#)). United Nations Conference on Trade and Development ([UNCTAD \(2018\)](#)) also posits that Covid-19 not only fast-tracked online shopping but also changed the online shopping tendencies that might be lasting. Besides this Covid-19 situation, many online business giants are already prominent across the world. For example, Amazon, a major online shopping website, has a share in electronics sales of 26.3% which is almost ¼ of total electronics sales, and also grasps the e-book market to 79% in the UK ([Reid, 2014](#)). According to [FORTUNE \(2014\)](#), Amazon is ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in the world's most admired companies list. Amazon is also the number one investor in the USA with 34 billion dollars in infrastructural investment and 400,000 jobs created only in 2020 ([Amazon, 2021](#)). The online transport service Uber is another example of popular e-commerce that is operating in 65 countries and 450 cities of the world with 1.5 billion USD annual revenue and 62.5 billion USD worth ([Manangi, 2017](#)). There are also many other websites (Ali Baba, Draz. pk, eBay, OLX, etc.) that share a large public interest and are used for online shopping and other services locally and internationally. It makes E-commerce pop culture.

## **Mobile Applications**

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As the digital revolution took the world by storm, mobile applications (Apps) have emerged as pop culture in terms of their mammoth use. TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Zoom, etc. are a few of the major apps. Curry (2022) articulates that in 2020, globally downloads of TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram were 850 million, 600 million, 540 million, and 503 million respectively. Other Apps like

Zoom, Messenger, Snapchat, and telegram were also downloaded by millions. Web 2.0 has enabled content generation therefore these applications are not only promoting but also producing pop culture. There is a mushrooming growth of dating apps as well. All major websites and digital platforms have apps. Banks have digital applications for online banking. Digital platforms like LinkedIn, Netflix; different state and global TV channels, and newspapers like PTV, BBC, CNN, Aljazeera, The Nation, New York Times, etc. have their digital apps. Focusing on TikTok specifically, there are millions of users of TikTok globally so this consumption and usage can be called pop culture ([Zuo & Wang, 2019](#)). The high scale of consumption and availability of numerous apps on app stores with millions of downloads and reviews make apps pop culture.

## **Pop Culture and Cultural Diplomacy**

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Observing the power of pop culture supported by the media, some researchers have claimed that in the future pop culture can be used for transnational agenda setting and cultural diplomacy through cultural imperialism. Referring to the Korean cultural wave [Jung \(2019\)](#) proposes that pop culture can be used for cultural agenda setting through media. The researcher further claims that it can alter the perception of the international audience about any specific nation and this use of pop culture is called pop culture diplomacy and soft power ([Iwabuchi, 2015](#)). Similarly, [Sawada \(2016\)](#) outlines that the promoters of pop culture diplomacy connect it with public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and soft power. The research further explains pop culture diplomacy as cultural diplomacy that is mainly reliant on pop culture.

## **Conclusions**

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Considering reviewed literature, it is concluded that everything that is produced, used, consumed, watched, and followed by common masses at a large scale is called pop culture. This research supports the theory of mediatization on its claim that media has changed the culture and that our society is getting more dependent on media. The media

has played an important role in cultural change and is still a main and strong player in formulating and promoting popular culture. Pop culture and media are interconnected, inter-reliant, and have a strong bond. Keeping in view the above-mentioned mediatized sources of popular culture; which are massively used and consumed, it can be maintained that media and pop culture work for each other. In all the sources of popular culture, the media is being used as a moderator, player, and facilitator. Since popular culture is a dynamic and continuous process, the media will always play a certain crucial role in popular culture because mediatized sources of popular culture are increasing with technological developments

in the media industry and also above-mentioned sources of popular culture are becoming more influential in society and its culture with huge consumption. Media platforms and media users are increasing simultaneously which makes the media a powerful driving force in social and cultural change. Developments in the media industry, cultural change, and increasing dependency on media demand more research in this area. Pop culture has emerged as a national and international power that would flourish more in the future with the expansion and availability of the media. There will be more dimensions of the phenomenon to be explored because this age is the age of big data and datafication.



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