

# Gender Expressions Among Youth: The Influence of Subcultures

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## Abstract:

Youth identity formation is a complex and dynamic process shaped by social, cultural, and personal factors, with gender expression playing a central role. In recent years, subcultures such as punk, goth, hip-hop, and cosplay have become significant spaces where adolescents experiment with gender identities beyond mainstream norms. This study explores how subcultural participation influences adolescents' gender expressions and identity construction. Drawing upon queer theory and sociological perspectives, it synthesizes existing literature and case studies, including research on hip-hop in Brazil and punk in North America, to examine how subcultures both resist and reproduce dominant gender norms. The discussion also considers the role of digital media in expanding subcultural communities and facilitating global networks of identity formation. Findings suggest that subcultures create opportunities for gender-nonconforming youth to resist traditional expectations and develop alternative forms of self-expression, while also reproducing challenges such as patriarchal hierarchies and social marginalization. These insights highlight the dual role of subcultures as both liberating and constraining forces in shaping adolescent gender identities.

**Keywords:** youth identity, gender expression, subcultures, queer theory, digital media

## 1. Introduction

The formation of adolescent identity is significantly influenced by various forms of gender expression, including appearance, language, clothing, behavior, and symbolic acts. Recent research indicates that approximately 3–4% of adolescents display gender expressions that deviate from conventional social

norms. Although mainstream culture continues to reinforce binary and traditional gender roles, adolescents demonstrate a stronger tendency toward gender nonconformity than adults, making youth a critical period for identity exploration.

Subcultures offer crucial spaces for the construction and negotiation of identity. Rather than being limited to leisure or entertainment, subcultures are dynamic

cultural environments where meanings related to gender are continuously created, contested, and redefined. For example, research on Brazilian hip-hop demonstrates how young women gain visibility in male-dominated contexts, challenging entrenched hierarchies while also negotiating patriarchal expectations. Similarly, practices such as tattooing, cosplay, and participation in alternative music scenes provide young people with opportunities to experiment with diverse gender identities. However, these environments are not free of challenges: gender-nonconforming youth often report elevated risks of substance use, psychological distress, and social marginalization both within mainstream society and in subcultural spaces.

Building upon these findings, the present study examines how participation in subcultures shapes adolescents' gender expressions and processes of identity formation. It focuses on the ways in which subcultural contexts influence the negotiation of gender identity, the extent to which these spaces challenge or reproduce dominant gender norms, and the opportunities and challenges encountered by gender-nonconforming youth within such cultural settings. By engaging with these dimensions, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the dual role subcultures play in both resisting and perpetuating existing gender norms, thereby offering new insights into youth identity formation.

## 2. Gender Expression in Subcultures

### 2.1 Definition of Subcultures

Before examining their impact on gender identity, it is essential to define the concept of subcultures. Generally, subcultures are understood as distinct social groups that distinguish themselves from mainstream society through unique norms, beliefs, values, and symbolic practices. These groups often emerge as responses to perceived social, cultural, or political marginalization, allowing members to articulate alternative worldviews and create spaces for collective belonging.

According to Haenfler in *Subcultures: Foundations*, subcultures are not merely spaces for leisure or entertainment but dynamic social environments in which individuals actively construct, negotiate, and perform identity[1]. Mem-

bers of these groups embrace alternative forms of cultural expression to explore different facets of their personal and social identities, including gender. Such engagement enables youth to experiment with styles, behaviors, and social roles that may diverge from mainstream expectations, thereby facilitating processes of self-discovery and identity formation.

Crucially, subcultures serve as sites of social learning and opposition. While they often challenge dominant societal norms, including binary conceptions of gender, they also reproduce certain hierarchies and values within their own contexts. Understanding how young people interact with subcultures and experiment with diverse gender expressions requires recognizing that these spaces simultaneously contest and negotiate conventional norms, offering participants novel possibilities for self-definition and agency. By situating youth identity development within the context of subcultural participation, researchers can better understand the interplay between cultural affiliation, social norms, and individual gender expression. Subcultures thus serve as critical arenas for exploring how young people navigate the tension between societal expectations and personal identity, particularly in the realm of gender.

### 2.2 Gender Stereotypes within Subcultures

Subcultures are inherently still impacted by gender norms and stereotypes, despite the fact that they are frequently viewed as free areas for individual expression.

The hip-hop scene in Brazil is a prime example of this effect. Although hip-hop culture provides young women with a platform to express themselves in settings historically dominated by men, it also imposes constraints on female participation. According to research, female rappers frequently have a conundrum: in order to be accepted, they must project an excessively "tough" persona. As Oliveira and Santos observe, despite being an alternative cultural space, Brazilian hip-hop reproduces many patriarchal dynamics of mainstream society, particularly regarding female visibility and legitimacy[2]. Similarly, Duarte emphasizes the ongoing balancing act that Brazilian female MCs must navigate between creative legitimacy and gender expectations[3], showing that patriarchal practices endure even in subcultural settings intended to challenge

prevailing hierarchies.

This example effectively illustrates that subcultures are complex social arenas. They have innate social prejudices even though they are able to challenge conventional wisdom. Stereotypical depictions of traditional gender roles and behaviours, as well as unequal opportunities for performance and media exposure, are just a few examples of how gender hierarchies might appear in these settings. For instance, female participants often experience heightened scrutiny over their appearance or authenticity, whereas male participants may be granted greater creative freedom without similar social penalties[1].

Moreover, these dynamics influence how young people negotiate their gender identities. This forces young people within subcultures to navigate a dual environment: mainstream expectations shape societal notions of masculinity and femininity, yet within the subcultural context, mainstream behavioural norms may be imbued with different meanings. Young people frequently use intricate adaptation and performance tactics as a result of this navigation, altering their interactions, behaviours, and aesthetics either intentionally or inadvertently to blend in with the subcultural group while claiming their individuality [2].

### **2.3 Gender Resistance within Subcultures**

Building on the gendered constraints observed in subcultural participation, Leblanc provides compelling analysis of gender resistance among girls in the male-dominated punk subculture, illustrating how youth can actively challenge and redefine conventional gender norms[4]. In her book *Punk Beauties: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*, Leblanc shows that young women do not merely comply with existing expectations; they strategically negotiate and resist both the subculture's male-centered norms and broader societal conventions.

These young women developed alternative and performative expressions of femininity that diverged from mainstream ideals. By adopting the aesthetic, language, and rebellious attitudes characteristic of punk culture, they crafted identities that simultaneously aligned with subcultural norms and disrupted dominant male narratives. For example, punk girls appropriated aggressive musical and fashion styles—such as spiked hair, ripped clothing, and

confrontational performance techniques—not simply to imitate male peers, but as a deliberate strategy to assert agency, claim visibility, and challenge the marginalization of female participants.

This form of gender resistance highlights the dual role of subcultures as both sites of constraint and spaces of empowerment. Within these environments, youth can experiment with non-traditional roles, explore autonomy and social influence, and challenge entrenched patriarchal hierarchies in ways that might be constrained in mainstream society. Importantly, gender resistance extends beyond fashion choices to encompass actions, social interactions, and creative engagement, all of which contribute to redefining normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Engaging in these forms of resistance not only allows young women to navigate the limitations imposed by subcultural gender hierarchies but also fosters broader identity development. Subcultures thus function as dynamic arenas where youth explore the fluidity of gender expression, practice alternative forms of selfhood, and cultivate resilience against normative pressures. Through these processes, subcultural participation becomes a crucial site for both the affirmation of individuality and the contestation of societal gender expectations.

### **2.4 Characteristics and Challenges of Youth Gender Expression**

Exploring and expressing gender identity is crucial during adolescence. At this stage of development, young people frequently experiment with different gender expressions as they seek to understand and define their identities within social contexts. Subcultures provide diverse venues for identity construction, and engagement in them is often a mediator of this investigation.

Subcultures give young people the chance to question prevailing gender standards by embracing beliefs, practices, and fashions that go against the grain. These subcultures are not impervious to the widespread impact of prevailing gender ideals, though. According to Haenfler, subcultures are dynamic settings in which people actively create, negotiate, and enact their identities, including their gender[1]. They can reinforce gender hierarchies and biases

even as they provide a platform for diverse expressions. The challenges adolescents face in expressing their gender identity are multifaceted. Young people may encounter persistent stereotypes regarding gender expression, particularly when their presentation deviates from traditional norms. External pressures, such as societal expectations and peer influence, can further exacerbate these challenges. C.J. Pascoe's book *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* offers valuable insights into how true masculinity is defined[5]. The book recounts the experience of a boy named Ricky, who became a target of his peers due to his feminine mannerisms and behavior. Although many boys stated they would not use fag to insult homosexuals, Ricky was frequently harassed for failing to display markers of traditional masculinity, such as athleticism or other forms of dominance. This example demonstrates that even within rebellious adolescent subcultures, gender stereotypes remain deeply entrenched, shaping identity formation and social interactions.

### 3. Discussion

The examination of young people's involvement in subcultures reveals how intricate and varied adolescent gender expression is. Subcultures are dynamic settings where youth create, negotiate, and enact identities, including gender, as was mentioned in section 2.1 (Haenfler, 2023). These spaces foster self-discovery and identity development by offering chances to try out different behaviours, looks, and social positions.

Nonetheless, as illustrated in sections 2.2 and 2.4, subcultures are not intrinsically immune to gender norms in society. Young people nevertheless face enduring gender norms and prejudices, even in environments that are sometimes depicted as alternative or rebellious. While adolescent boys like Ricky in Pascoe's study face harassment for failing to conform to traditional masculinity markers of masculinity, research indicates that female participants in Brazilian hip-hop must strike a balance between creative expression and patriarchal constraints [2,5]. These instances show how subcultural settings simultaneously promote and impede gender expression, reflecting larger social forces and providing special forums for identity development.

Subcultures, which offer both opportunities and limitations that affect gender expression, are crucial spaces for young people to negotiate their identities. Second, subcultural gender resistance shows how young people actively question norms rather than passively embracing them. Third, understanding how young people navigate tensions between societal expectations, subcultural norms, and personal agency.

The dynamic interaction between societal norms, individual agency, and identity formation is reflected in the impact of subcultures on teenage gender expression. Subcultures give young people transformative possibilities to fight and identify themselves, even in the face of enduring obstacles like preconceptions and social pressures. Understanding modern teenage gender expression and the changing ways in which youth negotiate, question, and modify gender norms requires an awareness of these examples.

### 4. Conclusion

This study looked at how subcultures affect adolescents' gender expression and identity development. It found that subcultures serve dual, contradictory roles: they both reinforce preconceptions that restrict gender freedom and challenge prevailing norms by fostering experimentation and opposition. The investigation revealed that subcultures exert a significant influence on adolescents' gender expression, offer possibilities and obstacles to young people who identify as gender nonconforming, and both reinforce and challenge prevailing gender notions.

However, the study's dependence on case studies and secondary materials from particular cultural contexts limits its applicability. Future studies could investigate comparative cross-cultural viewpoints or carry out longitudinal study to look at how subcultural engagement affects the development of gender identity over the long run. Furthermore, conducting empirical research with young subcultural participants could provide in-depth insights into the lived experiences of teenagers navigating gender within these alternative spaces.

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