

Polhemus - The Supermarket of Style



In his 1994 work, *The Supermarket of Style*, sociologist Ted Polhemus examines the increasing fluidity and diversity of youth subcultures in contemporary society. Polhemus argues that youth identity and style have become more fragmented and less fixed compared to earlier generations. This shift reflects broader cultural changes, including the rise of consumerism, the influence of mass media, and the breaking down of traditional social boundaries.

Polhemus introduces the concept of the supermarket of style to explain how young people today have access to a vast array of cultural influences, symbols, and fashions, much like consumers in a supermarket choosing from a variety of products. Rather than adhering to the distinct and rigid subcultures of the past (such as punks, mods, or skinheads), youth today are able to pick and mix elements from a wide range of styles, creating individualized and fluid identities. This is facilitated by the media, which offers an abundance of images and references that young people can incorporate into their personal style and identity.

The idea of fluidity is central to Polhemus' analysis. He suggests that traditional, fixed subcultures are being replaced by more fluid, temporary forms of belonging. This fluidity means that youth can move in and out of different styles and identities without feeling bound by the labels or norms of earlier subcultures. These subcultures no longer represent a fixed, cohesive group with a shared set of values or aesthetics but instead become a collection of styles that can be adopted and discarded at will.



Polhemus also discusses the role of consumption in shaping youth identities. The 'supermarket' metaphor highlights how youth culture has become highly consumer-driven, with young people using fashion, music, and other cultural products to construct and express their individual identities. This consumerism is not merely about acquiring products but about the symbolic meanings attached to those products. Young people today engage in what could be described as a process of "identity shopping," where they select elements that resonate with their personal tastes or the image they want to project.

Ultimately, Polhemus' work highlights a shift in how youth subcultures are constructed. Whereas earlier subcultures were often defined by their opposition to mainstream culture, the modern youth "supermarket" allows for more diverse, individualistic expressions of style and identity. The result is a more fragmented but also more dynamic cultural landscape, where youth can fluidly move between different identities, constantly reshaping themselves through consumption and style.

1. What is the main argument of Ted Polhemus in his 1994 work, *The Supermarket of Style*?
2. How does Polhemus describe the nature of youth identity and style in contemporary society?
3. What cultural changes does Polhemus suggest have influenced the fluidity of youth subcultures?
4. How does Polhemus' view of youth subcultures differ from the subcultures of earlier generations (such as punks, mods, or skinheads)?
5. What role does the media play in shaping contemporary youth identities, according to Polhemus?