



# Creating cultural products: Cities, context and technology



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## ABSTRACT

Cities remain critical for the creation of cultural products whether in the realm of film, television, music, opera, dance, fashion or art. Through the agglomeration of creative talent, cities provide a fertile ground for the development of new ideas and forms of cultural expression. This paper explores the role of culture and its context in fostering the creation of cultural products in cities as well as the role of technology. Changing technology is reshaping the role of cities in the creation of cultural products. The primacy of major cities will be reinforced by technology, while at the same time, secondary and tertiary cities face the prospect of being marginalized.

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## Introduction

Throughout history cities served vital functions in the formation of civilizations and the elements of culture embedded in them (Scott, 1997). Often cities grew to facilitate and serve as a nexus for trade and commerce providing an economic base and allowing cities to prosper and grow. The central role of commerce is evident in the initial development of cities such as London, New York and Hong Kong. As major ports they grew rapidly and facilitated growth and development of their respective countries. As commerce and culture grew in tandem, the latter provided distinctiveness to each city. It has been observed, “What links world cities to one another is trade, commerce, and finance. What makes them different from one another is culture.” (World Cities Culture Report, 2012). Cities serve as sites for the creation of cultural products and repositories for their preservation. As cities evolved, in addition to being a nexus for trade, they served as gathering places for diverse cultural activities. Trade brought not only exotic goods to a particular locale, but the diverse cultures of the individuals who transported them. Their contributions serve to both enrich and change the host culture.

Cities have always been highly concentrated agglomerations of individuals living in physical proximity. These

agglomerations vary depending on their centrality to the country in which they were located and the role they played in the larger economy. Further, the degree of heterogeneity in the composition of the inhabitants contributes to the vitality and cultural richness. New York City has always been extremely diverse. Of the 12 major cities examined in the *World Cities Culture Report (2012)*, New York had the highest percentage of non-native born inhabitants. Contemporary cities continue to function along the lines of ancient cities, only on a much broader scale. Cities such as New York and London play major roles in the world economy and influence culture beyond their geographic confines. Increasingly, technology plays a key role in extending the reach and importance of major cities. This also increases the dominance of cultural institutions in major cities and diminishes the role of those in secondary and tertiary cities.

This paper explores the role of cities in cultural formation and creation of cultural products. As a backdrop, culture in its various manifestations is examined. Once the concept of culture has been explored, the role of cities in influencing its development is considered. In addition, the key role played by changes in technology in making cultural products more broadly available is examined. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the likely impact of the changing technological environment on the role of cities in the creation of cultural products.

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## Composition and context of culture

Culture is “the man made part of the environment” (Herzkovits, 1955). This simple definition encompasses all non-naturally occurring elements. At its core are the abstract or intangible elements of culture, such as values and belief systems. Naroll (1970) refers to these as the *ethnie* core of culture. The more tangible aspects of culture are its material artifacts, such as art, clothing, music, dance, symbols and rituals. These are often manifestations of underlying values and beliefs. Communication links bind and perpetuate a cultural system. These elements exist within different contexts which exert influence and shape the evolution of the components of culture.

Cities provide unique contexts that bring the elements of one culture into close contact with the elements of another. Much of the richness in cultural industries is attributable to immigrant populations (Brandellero, 2009). This also has been examined indirectly in the literature on sub-culture where the changes in the consumption patterns of a particular immigrant population are examined (Penaloza, 1994; Smith, 2002). More broadly, this influence is occurring through direct or indirect exposure to members of other cultures or through cultural artifacts of another culture such as movies, music, television, art, dance and content on the internet (Craig, Douglas, & Bennett, 2009). These multiple influences mean that the proximate context of the city continues to exert influence on culture, but that increasingly a “virtual” context exists both within and outside the city’s confines. The specific nature of the virtual context can be different for individuals living in the same locale depending on the degree of exposure to the different external elements.

### *Composition of culture*

Values and beliefs, material artifacts, and communication links are closely intertwined. Communication provides a means of transmitting the intangible aspects of culture, such as values and beliefs from one person to another or from one generation to the next. This communication process is inherently dynamic and at the same time continually evolving. Artifacts ranging from religious icons to popular music and from movies to plays are also expressions of intangible beliefs. All three elements play a role in shaping the creation of cultural products. Increasingly, technology is exposing members of one culture to elements of other cultures. Much of this is through movies, television, advertisements and the internet.

Intangible elements of culture incorporate the dominant societal values and belief systems that characterize a society or culture and guide the patterning of behavior in that society. While there may be general overarching value orientations associated with a specific city within a country, there also exist multiple value systems within a particular city. Different ethnic and cultural groupings define their own values, and often there is a comingling of these values. Numerous other intangibles impact individual consumption patterns and ways of behaving (see Hofstede, 2001 and Schwarz, 1992). These include ideals and aspirations, role norms, gender ideology, cultural myths, metaphors and signs (see Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Stern, 1995;

Thompson, 1997; Thompson, 2004). They provide an indication of the richness and complexity of the relationship between culture and consumption. Other approaches have examined a specific value orientation, for example materialism or time orientation, comparing two or more societies on these dimensions (Belk & Pollay, 1985). Typically, this is linked to some aspect of behavior, for example, the importance attached to material possessions or lifestyle activities (Dawson & Bamossy, 1990).

Material culture is the most visible aspect of culture and often the most enduring. It incorporates the rituals, artifacts, institutions, music, dance and symbols of a society that bind it together and express underlying values and beliefs. The meaning and symbolism attached to possessions and goods owned by individuals, families or social groups is an integral component of culture. Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) note “objects serve as the set and props on the theatrical stage of our lives” and as “markers to remind ourselves of who we are” (page 531). Consumption patterns also demarcate lifestyles and social class (Holt, 1998).

Modes of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, are integral parts of culture (Hall, 1973; Samovar & Porter, 1994) and provide links within and across cultural units. Communication arises from the need to connect and interact with others and unites otherwise isolated individuals. It provides a mechanism for transmitting and interpreting messages relating to the world around an individual. Communication takes place in a physical and social context such as time, location and the social relationship of the participants, as well as in relation to other competing messages (Hall, 1973). These influence and condition how a communication is received. In addition, often communication is embedded in cultural products such as music, dance, literature, and film. Rapid advances in communications technology have dramatically reduced the importance of geographic proximity for communication. Individuals can now be in instant touch with others around the world by voice or text. As a result, physical proximity is no longer a key requirement for the transmission of cultural values or the formation of a cultural entity.

### *Culture’s context*

On a macro level Hermans and Kempen (1998) examine the process of globalization and the interconnectedness of cultures across the globe. They argue that culture is increasingly becoming deterritorialized and is not necessarily confined to specific locations. Pieterse (2009) looks at global culture in terms of hybridization of culture. Essentially new forms of culture are being created by the combination of elements from two existing cultures. Rowe and Schelling (1991) provide examples of hybridization, such as Asian rap, Irish bagels, Chinese tacos, Mardi Gras Indians, and Mexican school girls dressed in Greek togas dancing in the style of Isidora Duncan. These changes are magnified in cities by the physical proximity of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, high population density, and a faster pace of life than in rural and suburban areas.

Cultural boundaries are evolving, changing the context of culture and transforming its composition. The dynamics of this process result in alterations to traditional cultures and the creation of distinctly new consumption patterns

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