The concept of youth culture has long been associated with a series of distinctive leisure and lifestyle sensibilities shared by ‘youth’, that is to say, a socio-biological category consisting of young people between the ages of 15 and 25. More recently, however, this understanding of youth culture has been thrown into question. A key contributing factor here has been the increasing number of ageing ‘youth’ culturalists—people well into their 40s, 50s and 60s for whom the culture of their youth remains core to their understanding of themselves in the present (Bennett 2013). Satirical labels used by the media to describe the occasional ageing devotee of particular music genres and their associated styles, phrases such as ‘old punk’ and ‘ageing rocker’, now describe a significant minority of people in many places around the world.

This chapter examines the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of the ageing and youth culture phenomenon, beginning with a brief consideration of the origins and development of youth culture as a term that came to embrace some of the pivotal moments of popular culture during the second half of the twentieth century. This is followed by a look at how the once age-specific characteristics of youth culture have shifted in recent years and the way that this is underpinned to a large extent by changing social attitudes towards ageing and age-appropriate behaviour. Attention then turns to subjectivity in relation to ageing and youth culture with a focus on issues such as identity, body and sexuality. Following this consideration is made of the cultural industries’ response to the ageing audience for rock, punk and other contemporary genres of music and the retro-marketing that constitutes a major source of revenue for these industries are considered. Finally, the implications of ‘ageing youth’ for the future study and understanding of youth culture are discussed briefly.

The origins of youth culture

The notion of youth as a distinctive, age-centred stage in life with its own identity grounded in fashion, music and other cultural commodities first took shape during the mid-1950s with the advent of rock ‘n’ roll (Shumway 1992). Although style-based youth cultural groups had existed before the 1950s (see Fowler 2008), this was the first time that a dedicated youth market had existed to produce goods and services specifically aimed at catering for the tastes of young people (Chambers 1985). This new youth market responded to the fact that during the post-war
period young people had significant spending power. Across North America and Western Europe unprecedented levels of employment among young people between the ages of 16 and 25 gave this group an economic freedom unheard of among previous generations of youth (Bennett 2000). This ‘youthquake’, as Leech (1973) has termed it, propelled a succession of spectacular youth cultural styles across the western world for the next 3 decades (see Hebdige 1979). These included mod and the hippie counter-culture beat music, psychedelia and the counter-culture in the 1960s; glam and punk in the 1970s; and New Romantic, goth, metal and rap in the 1980s. Although temporally and stylistically distinct, what connected each of these youth cultures was their significance as platforms for collective manifestations of youth taste, ideology and lifestyle. While some of the aforementioned youth cultures, notably the counter-culture and punk, were more overtly political than others (Bennett 2001), each embedded a particular aesthetic sensibility through which the young people involved could attempt to define themselves as distinct from other social groups.

Typically, such distinction was most apparent in the stylistic assemblages of youth cultures. Since the early 1970s, various frameworks have been offered to explain the cultural significance of youth style. The subcultural theory of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) argued that youth style was an extension of the British class system, with post-Second World War working class youth cultures such as Teddy Boys and skinheads being manifestly interwoven with male working class sensibilities such as bravado, territoriality and community (Hall and Jefferson 1976). Weinstein (2000) adapted the core ideas of the CCCS to explain the appeal of heavy metal music for male, blue-collar youth in the USA. Hebdige (1979) applied semiotic theory to youth style, taking the example of punk as a youth cultural form that displayed the whole history of post-war youth culture in ‘cut-up and mix’ form on the surface of the body. Twenty years later Muggleton (2000) introduced a new chapter in the theorisation of youth style by arguing that, as the historical depth of post-war youth cultural history increased and the original meanings of stylistic resources were lost to new consumers, the meaning of youth style has become increasingly ‘post-subcultural’. By this Muggleton means that stylists are more prone to pick and mix stylistic resources from different eras of youth culture together to create an image that is aesthetically pleasing from an individual perspective.

Each of the above theorisations of youth style has been extensively criticised (see Bennett 2011). A problem not addressed in much of this criticism, however, is the limited currency of arguments focusing exclusively on the young in debates about youth culture even as the age-demographic of youth cultural affiliation has begun to shift. An early indication of the awareness of this among youth cultural theorists is evident in Thornton’s (1995) work on dance music and club culture, where she suggests that for some older clubbers the dance scene remains significant due to it providing an opportunity for them to resist social ageing. Comments such as these, while enlightening, need to be placed in the context of a broader debate regarding shifting attitudes towards ageing and how these are giving rise to new sensibilities of ageing, style and identity.

As young as you feel

As Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) argue, during the last 20 years socio-cultural attitudes towards ageing have shifted significantly, away from essentialist ideas of age and age-appropriate behaviour to a more pluralistic and individualised view of ageing. This aligns with more general theories of identity in late modernity. Thus, as Giddens (1991) argues, social identities can no longer be regarded as tied to class, community, religion, education and other structural and institutional characteristics of the social fabric. Rather, social identity is reflexively constructed and
articulated in a way that draws on both structural experience and also cultural resources—objects, images and text appropriated by individuals and inscribed with individual meanings that give them a more personalised value in the context of everyday life (see also Chaney 2002).

It follows that such new perspectives on identity can also be applied to ageing. Indeed, given the shifts described above it is now viable to talk about ageing in two distinct ways: ‘biological’ and ‘social-cultural’. As Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) note, the biological fact and effects of ageing are to a large extent irreversible, though innovations in health care and new approaches towards exercise, diet and general well-being can, in some cases, offset and delay the more debilitating effects of physical and mental deterioration experienced by the ageing body (Hunt 2005). Socio-cultural ageing refers both to the ways that ageing has been socially constructed in any given time and place and also the ways that individuals seek to negotiate this through equipping themselves with tools and resources to grow old in ways that resonate with their lifestyles and personal aesthetics. In essence, it facilitates the management of ageing through a reflexive process of on-going (re)evaluation of identity and those associated experiences and resources through which an individual's identity has been constructed and reproduced over time.

When viewed in this context, with ageing cast as reflexive and culturally situated, the ageing individual is given added capacity to actively work through the ageing process. Rather than ageing presenting as a barrier, or series of barriers, to particular articulations of identity, including those acquired and developed during teenage and early adulthood, the individual is given legitimacy to retain those aspects of their identity and to present them as integral to their sense of themselves and associations with others, over the full term of the life course. In this sense, the ageing baby boomer generation, now is their mid-60s and in some cases older, are an interesting case in point. In the 1950s and early 1960s, this generation was the first to pass through Leech’s (1973) youthquake. The boomers were in effect the first generation to come of age in the consumer age, their lifestyle outlooks and desires working in a cultural dialogue with the media and cultural industries that produced a stream of pop icons, music, style and associated resources that fuelled the dreams of the boomer generation and reconfirmed its status as a distinctive (youth) generation. At a distance of 50 years, the boomers again find themselves in a unique situation as the first of the post-Second World War generations to approach the third age. Moreover, the popular culture resources that helped to produce the generational feel of the boomer generation remain current—even to the point that many of the original pop icons of the age, such as the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney and The Who, continue to tour and record. But perhaps of equal significance is the way these icons age with their audience. In this sense, they remain role models just as they were in the early 1960s (see Bennett 2013).

Much has been written about the baby boomers and their ‘claim’ on youth culture (see, for example, Lipsitz 1994). The boomer perspective, however, is merely one representation of the way in which the sensibilities of youth and the sensibilities of ageing are articulated in a simultaneous fashion in a process that connects the individual’s past and present in a seamless fashion. Many other similar instances of this from different generations can be seen, for example, in ageing-related work on punk (Bennett 2006), straightedge (Haenfler 2006) grunge (Strong 2011), hip hop (Fogarty 2012), dance (Gregory 2012) and goth (Hodkinson 2012). Individuals interviewed for these respective studies articulate an ongoing connection to the styles and scenes of their youth that goes beyond mere feelings of nostalgia and/or a desire to be young again. More pertinent still is the way that lifestyle sensibilities and outlooks acquired by these individuals as biologically young people have become integral to their more long-term sense of identity. In this sense, such lifestyle sensibilities and outlooks are inseparable from a basic sense of self that
pervades even as these individuals have moved well beyond an age conventionally associated with the types of cultural sensibilities in which they invest on a day-to-day basis (Bennett 2013).

**Youth culture, ageing and subjectivity**

Over the last 5 years there has been increasing interest among youth researchers in what could be seen as the ‘post-youth’ trajectory of youth cultural identities and lifestyles. In its current form such work is focused firmly on the global north, but as youth cultural research gathers more traction in regions such as the Middle East and Southeast Asia it is reasonable to assume that studies of ageing and youth culture will also emerge from these parts of the world.

Bennett’s (2006) work on punk and ageing offered a formative glance over the emerging terrains of the on-going post-youth investment in youth music and style. As Bennett observed, far from regarding themselves as trapped in a nostalgic yearning for the past, the middle-aged punks featured in his study demonstrated an active investment in the past, present and future of punk. Although this encapsulated a shared self-positioning among the ageing, largely male, cohort in the study as ‘forefathers’ of punk, such a sensibility did not restrict their attachment to punk to an age-specific understanding of the genre’s significance. Rather, this group of ageing punks were both aware of and highly supportive of punk’s status as a current and continually developing genre and scene. In later work, Bennett (2013) considers how the inspiration acquired from punk has influenced ageing punks over the life course, this being vividly illustrated through a series of demonstrated affinities with causes such as animal rights, support for green politics and the formulation of DIY (do-it-yourself) careers that have enabled a number of old punks to work outside the strictures of mainstream work and employment. Similarly, while other ageing punks have acquired more mainstream employment, they continue to engage with the punk scene.

The extent to which ageing members of youth cultures perceive the importance of visual image as important in the articulation of identity has also been a focus for several studies. Haenfler’s (2006) study of straightedge (a style and genre that emerged from punk and hardcore where members typically abstain from alcohol, drugs and casual sex) notes how ageing members (or Xers) of the straightedge scene will often reduce their emphasis on the importance of visual appearance. According to Haenfler, this is because as these individuals age they consider themselves to have absorbed the core principles of straightedge to the extent that they no longer feel that this needs to be confirmed through appearance. Bennett’s (2006; 2013) work on punk offers similar observations regarding the toning down of visual style among ageing punks who believe that the necessity of such a visual display has been removed through acquiring a deeply ingrained punk identity.

Holland (2004) contributes an important additional perspective here through considering the relationship between appearance, ageing and identity for ageing female members of alternative music scenes. As Holland observes, women face a greater risk of stigmatisation for continuing to visually articulate a stylised identity as they grow older. Nevertheless, women interviewed by Holland, most of whom were at the time in their 40s, observed that the identities they had developed in their youth remained a vital aspect of their current selves. Moreover, like the older male scene members discussed above, these women had, in many cases, also taken steps to tone down their visual appearance as they aged and became more comfortable with the notion of an alternative identity as part of a more corporally ingrained sense of self.

Interestingly, the notion of ageing as promoting a new sense of confidence, both on a personal private level and in public space, is a common aspect of the findings produced in the work on youth culture and ageing done to date. In opposition to the view that individuals fear
Youth culture, ageing and identity

the social stigma of being labelled a ‘hanger-on’ or ‘over-grown teenager’, a number of studies conducted across the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia all point to the fact that post-youth in a biological and/or socially proscribed sense of the term does not result in an automatic jet-tisoning of identity traits and characteristics. In her instructive work on the queer music scene in Brisbane, Australia, Taylor (2012) examines how the local queer community have, over a period of years, evolved a scene that provides for the articulation of a collective sense of queer identity in a city where, like many other cities around the world, such forms of identity have been, or continue to be, socially marginalised. As Taylor observes, for ageing queers the demands on the ageing body of continuing to participate in a scene where there is a heavy emphasis on frequenting clubs, dancing, drinking and staying out until the early hours of the morning can be significant. While a number of the interviewees in Taylor’s work openly comment on their declining ability and/or lack of desire to keep up with such physical demands, at the same time most continue to identify as members of the local queer scene and continue to participate, if less infrequently, in scene-based events. For them, the scene has over the years become a key anchoring point for the way that they reproduce and articulate a sense of queerness. This idea of the scene as a resource, as something that may not be physically engaged with on a regular basis but something envisaged as there to be occasionally ‘gone back to’ if one so chooses can become a highly important marker for retaining a sense of who one is.

The physical demands of maintaining a particular form of identity is also a focus for Fogarty (2012) in her work on ageing breakdancers. As Fogarty explains, as breakdancers (or b-boys and b-girls, to use the original and now again more accepted terminology) become older, so the demands on the body, including the risk of injury, become greater. An important strategy for helping ageing breakdancers remain involved in the activity is what Fogarty refers to as ‘muscle memory’. This describes the way in which dance moves learned and practiced over a period of years become so embedded that they are at some level easier for the older, more experienced breaker to execute than for a younger, more physically fit, breakdancer. However, such muscle memory provides other avenues through which ageing breakdancers can remain involved in and legitimate their on-going attachment to the scene. Thus, as Fogarty notes, with such embodied competency comes the ability to teach new generations of dancers. Thus, the ageing body becomes a vessel through which the older breakdancer can offer younger members of the scene forms of physical and cultural competency. Such a form of youth cultural knowledge transfer becomes in itself an expression of authenticity for the ageing youth culturalist—a means through which they can understand themselves as continuing to play an important, and in some cases pivotal, role in a specific scene.

Tsitsos’s (2012) work on slamdancing offers a different perspective on extreme physical involvement in a youth cultural scene and how this is challenged by age. A heavily masculinised activity, slamdancing is a style of dance that emerged from the US punk scene, where individuals dance in a circular motion, frequently colliding and knocking each other to the floor. Although it appears outwardly violent, slamdance has rules and a form of etiquette, including helping dancers to their feet if they have been knocked over. As this description suggests, slamdancing becomes increasingly demanding as the individual grows older. In his work, Tsitsos identifies three different ways in which ageing scene members deal with this issue. The first is to move into different scene activities such as performing in a band or promotion of shows. As Tsitsos explains, through doing so ageing individuals can still connect with the scene and feel a part of its production but in different ways that do not take a toll on their bodies in the same way. Another strategy is to restrict their dancing to special occasions, such as a reunion gig by their favourite band. In such instances, slamdancing becomes part of a collective celebration of a particular moment or era in the punk scene where band and audience have aged together and reconnect through
the experience of the performance. The final strategy is to move back from the ‘pit’ where the dancing takes place to other zones in the venue (Fonarow 1997) where the show—and the dancing—can be observed and enjoyed. This notion of ageing equating to having paid one’s dues and moving on to a different level of scene membership is also apparent in other studies of ageing and youth culture (see for example, Bennett 2006; Haenfler 2006) and denotes another important way in which ageing members of youth cultural scenes are able to create new forms of attachment to those scenes in which they have had long-term investment.

**The market strikes back**

The music and related popular cultural industries’ response to the ‘ageing’ youth market has been significant. At a time when it has been hard for many of these industries—and in particular the music industry—to retain a viable foothold in the global consumer market, the opportunity to provide goods and other services to an ageing consumer base, often with considerable economic power, has been quickly exploited (Savage 1990). An early indication of the lucrative nature of this approach was seen in the mid-1990s with the arrival of the CD and the marketing of CD reissues of existing vinyl albums. Cheap to produce, given that all of the major expense of recording and artwork had been met in the production of the original vinyl product, the CD reissue became a template for a steadily growing range of products targeted primarily at middle-age consumers of music and music-related popular culture (Bennett 2001).

This consumer group is now able to choose from a range of music—deluxe CD reissues, box sets, previously unreleased concert performances and so forth. In addition, the introduction of the DVD has provided a platform for an increasing circulation of rock documentaries, archive studio performance, concert and festival footage, and music-related films. Such reissued material is also supported by a range of print media, including dedicated retro magazines, such as *Mojo* and *Classic Rock*, together with artists’ (auto)biographies covering a range of rock, punk and other popular music genres to have emerged during the last 60 years.

The commercial significance of the live music market has also received a significant boost as a result of this hyper-commodification of boomer and post-boomer popular culture tastes. The last two decades have seen a proliferation of tribute bands (Homan 2006), live performances of classic albums (Bennett 2009) and reunion tours or special one-off performances by various artists including Led Zeppelin, The Police, Magazine and Status Quo (whose Frantic Four tour of the UK in early 2013 showcased the classic line-up of the 1970s and early 1980s). In addition to the music featured, each of the above examples demonstrates the on-going depth of support for and investment in these artists and the popular/youth cultural eras for which they stand. Just as youth culture in the early 1950s was inextricable from the proliferation of niche products with which the popular culture industries targeted the young consumer, so the cultural identities of the ageing boomer and post-boomer generations of today cannot be regarded in isolation from the array of cultural products through which they in part identify and locate themselves as cultural citizens in the early twenty-first century.

**Conclusion**

As this chapter has sought to illustrate, the time in which youth culture could be positioned as the unique purview of the young has now passed. While it is unlikely that new youth cultural phenomena will cease to emerge, what is clear from the on-going research presented in this chapter is that the lifestyles that emerge from differing forms of youth cultural practice do not remain a ‘fad’ of youth but often grow with individuals who appropriate them. In doing so, such lifestyles
propel the identities of individuals well beyond the biological stages of youth and early adulthood. While not dismissing the importance of retaining an interest in and critical perspective on emergent trends in youth culture, youth cultural theorists need to become increasingly aware of what happens at the other end of the age spectrum as those who affiliate themselves with the styles and tastes of specific youth cultures carry the influences of such resources with them along the lifecourse. Bennett (2009) has argued that what was once regarded as youth and/or popular culture must now be seen as a pivotal aspect of the broader cultural development of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As individuals associated with particular scenes—hip hop, punk, rock, goth, dance and so on—age, much of what we understand as the process of identity—culture, lifestyle, belief, faith, political participation, citizenship and belonging—is increasingly intertwined with the experiences they have had and continue to have as a result of their stylistic, musical and associated aesthetic affiliations.

References

Fogarty, M. 2012, ‘“Each one teach one”: B-boying and ageing’, in A. Bennett and P. Hodkinson (eds), Ageing and youth cultures: music, style and identity, Berg, Oxford.
Lipsitz, G. 1994, ‘We know what time it is: race, class and youth culture in the nineties’, in A. Ross and T. Rose (eds), Microphone fiends: youth music and youth culture, Routledge, London.

Strong, C. 2011, Grunge: music and memory, Ashgate, Aldershot.


