SOFTWARE & TECH

# Stan Cohen Folk Devils And Moral Panics

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## Introduction

In the landscape of sociology and media studies, few concepts have proven as enduring and insightful as those introduced by Stanley Cohen in his landmark 1972 work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. More than five decades later, the framework Cohen developed continues to offer a powerful lens through which to understand how societies react to perceived threats, often amplifying fear far beyond rational proportion. Whether it is the panic over youth subcultures, video game violence, or online misinformation, the cycle described by Cohen remains startlingly relevant. This article explores the origins, mechanisms, and contemporary significance of **Stan Cohen folk devils and moral panics**, unpacking how a sociological theory from the 1970s can still explain modern social hysteria.

## Who Is Stan Cohen?

Stanley Cohen (1942–2013) was a British sociologist and criminologist whose work focused on the sociology of deviance, social control, and human rights. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, Cohen moved to the United Kingdom, where he became a central figure in the development of labelling theory and the study of moral panics. His seminal book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, was published in 1972 and immediately changed the way academics and the public understood media-driven social scares. Cohen's ideas did not remain confined to academia; they entered mainstream discourse, repeatedly used to analyse everything from the Satanic panic of the 1980s to the fears surrounding social media use among teenagers.

Cohen's work was not merely descriptive. It was deeply critical of the ways in which power structures, particularly the media and law enforcement, could manufacture consent for harsh social policies by first creating a target—a folk devil—and then igniting a moral panic around that target. Understanding **Stan Cohen folk devils and moral panics**therefore requires recognising that the concept is not just about crime or deviance, but about the political and social functions of fear.

## Defining Folk Devils

At the heart of Cohen's theory is the notion of a "folk devil." A folk devil is a person, group, or subculture that is defined as a threat to society's values, interests, and safety. These figures are demonised and stereotyped, often becoming scapegoats for broader social anxieties. The term itself draws on anthropological ideas about "folk" as ordinary people and "devils" as evil beings—creating a powerful binary of good versus evil.

Key characteristics of a folk devil include:

- Visibility: They are often easily identifiable by appearance, behaviour, or lifestyle (e.g., punks, mods, rockers, gang members).
- Symbolic threat: They represent deeper cultural fears—such as loss of control, moral decay, or generational conflict.
- Simplification: Complex social issues are reduced to the actions of a deviant few, making it easier to direct public anger.
- Dehumanisation: Folk devils are portrayed as less than human, lacking rationality or morality, which justifies harsh responses.

Cohen argued that the creation of folk devils is not accidental. It is a process actively driven by media, politicians, and moral entrepreneurs who benefit from the resulting moral clarity and social solidarity. The folk devil becomes the perfect enemy: a tangible target onto which society can project its worries.

## Moral Panics Explained

A moral panic occurs when a condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests. Cohen identified five distinct stages or elements of a moral panic:

1. Concern: There is a heightened level of concern about the behaviour or group in question, often measured by opinion polls, media coverage, or legislative attention.
2. Hostility: Increased hostility toward the folk devil develops; they are seen as an enemy of respectable society.
3. Consensus: A broad social consensus emerges that the threat is real and serious. Dissenting voices are marginalised.
4. Disproportionality: The reaction is out of proportion to the actual threat. Statistics and evidence are exaggerated or manufactured.
5. Volatility: Moral panics are highly volatile, erupting suddenly and then subsiding, though they can have long-lasting effects on legislation and public attitudes.

The term **Stan Cohen folk devils and moral panics**is often used together because a moral panic cannot exist without a folk devil. The panic is the social reaction; the folk devil is the object of that reaction. Together, they form a dynamic cycle of fear, amplification, and social control.

## The Classic Example: Mods and Rockers

Cohen's original study examined the British youth subcultures of the 1960s: the Mods and the Rockers. In the mid-1960s, these two groups clashed in seaside towns like Clacton, Brighton, and Margate. The actual violence was relatively minor—some fights, vandalism, and public disorder. However, the media coverage was sensationalised, portraying the clashes as a national crisis. Headlines screamed about "invasion" and "terror," while politicians demanded tougher laws and policing.

Cohen showed how the media amplified the events by using emotive language, interviewing "experts" who supported the panic, and ignoring evidence that most young people were not involved. The Mods and Rockers were transformed into folk devils, representing parental fears about teenage rebellion, consumerism, and the breakdown of traditional values. The moral panic that ensued led to increased police powers, curfews, and public support for punitive measures—all despite the actual harm being minimal.

This case remains the archetype for understanding **Stan Cohen folk devils and moral panics**. It demonstrates how a relatively small deviant act can be blown out of proportion to serve larger social and political purposes.

## Key Elements in the Formation of a Moral Panic

Cohen emphasised that moral panics do not emerge spontaneously. They are manufactured through a combination of factors:

- Media amplification: News outlets select stories that fit a narrative of threat, using dramatic headlines, images, and language. The "deviancy amplification spiral" occurs when media coverage causes more deviance (or perceived deviance), which in turn generates more coverage.
- Moral entrepreneurs: These are individuals or groups who campaign for the suppression of a particular behaviour. They often have a vested interest—politicians seeking re-election, religious leaders, or advocacy groups.

- Public anxiety: Existing social tensions (economic uncertainty, generational gaps, racial conflict) provide fertile ground for a moral panic.
- Authorities and experts: Police, judges, and academics may support the panic by offering “scientific” or “official” confirmation of the threat.

Once these elements align, the panic becomes self-sustaining. The folk devil becomes a permanent symbol of danger, even after the panic subsides. The term “folk devil” thus carries a warning: society often punishes the symbol rather than addressing the underlying problem.

## Criticisms and Evolution of the Concept

While Cohen’s framework remains influential, it has not been without criticism. Some sociologists argue that the concept of moral panic is too broad and can be applied to almost any social fear, diluting its analytical power. Others note that Cohen’s original model was rooted in a specific time and place (1960s Britain) and may not fit all cultures or eras. Additionally, the rise of digital media has transformed how panics spread. With social media, moral panics can erupt globally within hours, and folk devils can be created by anonymous online mobs as easily as by newspapers.

Despite these critiques, the core ideas endure. Scholars like Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda have refined the concept, identifying three different types of moral panics: grassroots (arising from public concern), elite-engineered (orchestrated by powerful groups), and interest-group driven (pushed by activists). Meanwhile, the term “moral panic” has become part of everyday language, used by journalists, bloggers, and politicians—though often inaccurately. Understanding **Stan Cohen folk devils and moral panics** in their original, nuanced sense helps prevent the concept from being trivialised.

## Contemporary Examples of Moral Panics and Folk Devils

Cohen’s theory is far from a historical curiosity. Modern examples abound:

- Video game violence: Since the 1990s, violent video games have been portrayed as folk devils, blamed for school shootings and youth aggression, despite mixed evidence. Moral panics have led to rating systems and legislative attempts at censorship.
- Social media and “slactivism”: Teenagers’ use of platforms like TikTok or Instagram is frequently framed as a threat to mental health, privacy, and social cohesion. The folk devil is the “addicted” youth, and the panic has spurred laws restricting access.
- Immigration and crime: Immigrant groups have historically been cast as folk devils, especially during economic downturns. Media narratives of “invasion” and “waves of crime” often lack empirical basis but generate intense moral panic and punitive policies.
- “Cancel culture”: In recent years, both activists and conservatives have been labelled folk devils in overlapping panics about free speech and social justice. The demonisation of each side mirrors Cohen’s description of the Mods and Rockers.

Each of these cases follows the pattern Cohen identified: a group or activity is singled out, media amplifies the threat, public concern rises, and disproportionate responses are demanded. The specific details change, but the mechanics of **Stan Cohen folk devils and moral panics** remain remarkably consistent.

## Societal Impact and Lessons

Why should we care about moral panics? Because they have real consequences. Harsh laws, increased policing, stigmatisation of vulnerable groups, and waste of public resources are common outcomes. For example, the war on

drugs in many countries can be seen as one long-running moral panic, with racial minorities as folk devils. The panic justified mass incarceration and devastated communities, all while failing to reduce drug use.

Cohen's work teaches us to be sceptical of sensationalist media and to question who benefits from a panic. It encourages critical thinking about the proportionality of our fears. In an age of information overload, where every crisis seems immediate and existential, the concept of moral panic offers a vital tool for reflection. By recognising the pattern, we can resist the urge to demonise and instead address problems rationally.

## Conclusion

Stan Cohen's theory of folk devils and moral panics is not merely an academic artefact; it is a living framework that continues to illuminate the ways societies construct threats and manage fear. From Mods and Rockers to modern online controversies, the same dynamics of amplification, demonisation, and disproportionate response recur. Understanding **Stan Cohen folk devils and moral panics**empowers us to see through the hype and to question the stories we are told about who is dangerous and why. In a world where panic is often a strategy for control, Cohen's insights remain more urgent than ever.


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