



17 Famous Moral Panic Examples

By Chris Drew (PhD) / December 14, 2022

MORAL PANIC

Moral panics are irrational fears that have been spread and exaggerated by the media.

CASE STUDY

Stanley Cohen explored the Mods vs. Rockers moral panic of the 1960s. The Mods and Rockers were two British sub-cultures defined by their musical and clothing preferences.

In 1964, the Mods and Rockers would fight on the streets and beaches of Southern England, leading to widespread fear about 'the youths' undermining traditional values and law & order.

FEATURES

- 1 Concern
- 2 Hostility
- 3 Consensus
- 4 Disproportionality
- 5 Volatility

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Moral panics are irrational fears that have been spread and exaggerated by the media. Each generation faces its own moral panics. Examples include the Salem Witch Trials in the 1690s, danger of Rock n' Roll in the 1950s, the war on drugs in the 1980s.

The [sociological concept](#) of moral panic was first coined by Jock Young (1971) and, later, Stanley Cohen (1972). Others have since identified features of moral

panic, like Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994) who argue a moral panic has the following features:



1. **Concern** – an event sparks social anxiety.
2. **Hostility** – a [subculture](#) is seen as ‘folk devils’ who are looked upon with hostility.
3. **Consensus** – fear of this subculture becomes the dominant narrative in media and social discussion.
4. **Disproportionality** – The threat is exaggerated
5. **Volatility** – A moral panic emerges and disappears suddenly (often when another moral panic takes its place)

While moral panics are subjective (some people would consider some of the below fears to be *rational*), most of the below moral panic examples come from scholarly research that supports the idea that these concepts fit the four moral panic criteria above.

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Moral Panic Examples

1. Mods And Rockers

The first moral panic that was discussed in sociological literature was that of the Mods vs. Rockers by Stanley Cohen. The Mods and Rockers were two 1960s British sub-cultures defined by their musical and clothing preferences:



- **The Rockers** rode motorcycles, listened to rock music, and wore leather jackets.
- **The Mods** rode scooters, listened to R&B and soul music, and wore suits.

In 1964, the Mods and Rockers would fight on the streets and beaches of Southern England, leading to widespread fear about 'the youths' undermining traditional values and law & order.

According to Cohen, the widespread media panic about the Mods and Rockers clashes were exaggerated to sell newspapers. In effect, it was the media stirring up discord more than the fights which were sporadic, small, and generally far less consequential than football riots that were an ongoing part of British culture.

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2. The War On Drugs

The War on Drugs is one of the most long-standing American moral panics. Starting in the 1970s and peaking in the late 80s and early 90s, this moral panic was weaponized by politicians such as Ronald Regan and Bill Clinton who raced to be 'toughest on crime'.

It is argued the war on drugs is a moral panic due to the exaggeration of the issue and hostility toward recreational drug users. This flowed through to punitive drug laws that led to decades-long imprisonment for minor offences.



Looking at the real-world data, it appears drug use actually declined in the 1980s (Hawdon, 2001) while social fear of drugs ‘corrupting the youth’ continued to rise.

3. Critical Race Theory

In 2021, widespread fear of the teaching of Critical Race Theory in American schools was promoted by conservative media working alongside Republican governed states.

The left [quickly identified](#) this fear of CRT as a moral panic stirred up to try to find a wedge issue and break President Joe Biden’s high-ratings honeymoon period. In particular, substantive evidence that CRT was being taught below the university level was lacking. Furthermore, it’s questionable whether CRT is really a dangerous theory or simply a folk devil because it *sounds* scary.

Here, we see a common theme in moral panic theory: accusations against conservative elements of the media for stirring up moral panic with accusations against liberals for downplay potentially serious social issues.

4. Disappearing Childhood

In 1983, Neil Postman wrote a book titled *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman, 1983). In this book, Postman argued that children are becoming adults too fast. Primarily, he put blame on visual media such as television which give children access to adult knowledge before they could even read.

Since, we’ve had sporadic moral panics about children’s exposure to inappropriate content on the internet and other [examples of new media](#). And



according to [this article](#), fears about media corrupting childhood have always occurred. In the Victorian Era, the spread of novels was a moral panic because it distracted children from the Bible!

5. Immigration

Immigrants are a group who are the topic of [recurring moral panics](#). Media are quick to jump on issues of migrants diluting national identities, committing crimes, and putting a burden on welfare systems. Examples include:

- In the 2018 midterm elections in the US, widespread fear of migrant caravans heading north from Central America. The fear conveniently faded shortly after the midterms.
- The Australian 'boat people' crisis reached its peak in the early 2010s.
- The European Union fear of migrants coming from Africa.
- Fear of Polish immigrants in the UK (Pijpers, 2006)

This is a topic that perhaps deserves some nuance, given the fact open borders would likely have negative impacts on some countries. Therefore, there will always be debate over which concerns are exaggerated moral panics and which are genuine concerns.

6. The Red Scare

Fear of socialists and communists has been another recurring moral panic throughout the West. Perhaps most evident during the Cold War, this moral panic led to Hollywood blacklists in the era from 1945 – 1960, and McCarthyism in the 1950s.

According to Pontikes, Negro and Rao (2010), the Red Scare even led to fear of



people who worked or associated with known left-wing activists in Hollywood.

People were disproportionately stigmatized, excluded from employment, and shunned for rewards due to their friendships with left-leaning actors and directors.

Again, we can see here that moral panic often occurs as conservative backlash to liberal topics of the day. Conservatives see liberals as undermining national values, the media exaggerates the issue, and liberals downplay the potentially valid concerns.

7. The Devil's Music

Perhaps best embodied in the *Footloose* films, the concept that new iterations of music and dance could corrupt the youth has been repeated through the generations. An early iteration was Blues music in the 1920s, followed by Jazz in the 1950s.

The sad history of this moral panic is that it's got some dark racial undertones. Blues and Jazz both had strong African American roots in the United States, and when white middle-class youths started to embrace it, there was plenty of outrage from the white establishment. Black culture might corrupt the whites!

In the 1950s, a lot of the fear about the 'corruptions' of rock was linked to dancing. The dances associated with rock music looked a lot like sex in a time when pre-marital sex was considered wrong. Similarly, some Christians started to theorize that there were messages from the devil integrated into the lyrics.

8. HIV/AIDS



Members of the LGBTQI+ community have always been subject of moral panic related to sex and sexuality. Their activities are often framed as uncouth and corrupting. When HIV was linked to homosexuality in the 1980s, media picked up on the idea that gay people were spreading HIV around the world.

Here, a folk devil was created. Gay people's part in spreading HIV to the general population was generally exaggerated by the media. As the 1990s came along and the moral panic died down, there was a pivot to instead blaming HIV on generally morally deviant behavior of youth, whereby gay people ceased to be the sole folk devil and instead youth more generally became the HIV folk devil, returning to a 'status quo'. Youth are more often than not the subject of moral panics!

9. War On Terror

After the 2001 terrorist attacks on September 11, a folk devil was made out of Muslims. While Islamic extremism represented a negligible percentage of the Islamic population in the United States, Muslims more generally faced significant racism. They had become the 'folk devil' of the early 2000s.

George Bush, the president at the time, identified this moral panic and attempted to dampen it with public outreach to Islamic populations.

Nevertheless, media panic ensued. The threat of Muslims to American culture and society was extremely exaggerated (white right-wing terrorism remains the greatest threat to US society).

10. Mugging



Famous cultural theorist Stuart Hall and his colleagues (1978, p. viii) examined mugging as an example of moral panic. According to Hall, the British public in the 1970s began: “to perceive crime in general and mugging in particular, as an index of the disintegration of the social order.”

According to Hall, a spike in reporting about mugging was linked to steadily rising crime but not necessarily to a huge spike in mugging. Rather, mugging became a symbol of society’s fear of criminals. Mugging is something that appeared indiscriminate – it could happen to anyone. It was thus the perfect candidate for mass hysteria propelled by profit-motivated tabloids.

11. QAnon

The interesting thing about the QAnon moral panic is that it’s a left-wing moral panic where the target folk devil is a conservative group. It’s usually the other way around!

QAnon emerged on the ‘free speech’ online forum 4chan to spread pro-Trump conspiracy theories. Their conspiracy theories are quite extreme and yet they have managed to infiltrate a significant sub-group of the conservative electorate.

In backlash, many mainstream and left-leaning media groups created a folk devil out of QAnon. Some could argue that their threat to democracy and their hold on the Republican party were exaggerated for media effect. Others might say they were a serious threat and a rallying group for the January 6 2021 capitol riots.

12. Tide Pods



Between 2013 and 2018, an internet challenge of teenagers eating tide pods (a laundry detergent) led to widespread media and political scrutiny. It led to the New York legislature introducing a bill to ban the detergents (it never passed) and Facebook and YouTube removing as many videos as they could.

According to [huffpost](#), this rose to the levels of moral panic, particularly because more children die from choking on other household goods including batteries.

13. The War On Christmas

It feels like every Christmas there are people in the right-wing media creating sensationalist articles about how some employer or another has banned their employees from saying 'Merry Christmas' with a preference for a more inclusive term like 'Happy Holidays'.

While it's true that *some* companies (like Starbucks) have opted for more inclusive branding, this choice is often inflated as an exaggerated '[cancel culture](#)' or 'War on Christmas' by a coalition of religious minorities and progressives who have a sinister plot to undermine Christianity and ban Christmas.

Clearly, this is laughable in an era where Western nations continue to have public holidays and extensive cultural celebrations every December.

Nevertheless, this intermittent moral panic recurs every December.

14. Paganism In The Roman Empire

The moral panic of Paganism in the Roman Empire is one of my favorite examples of moral panic because it shows just how far back moral panics go.



This moral panic may have different features to more modern versions because of the vastly different media landscape. Likely, paganism was subject to propaganda campaigns spread by the Roman Empire, particularly during the occupation of Britain, to convert the Celtic tribes to Christianity. Paganism was framed as witchcraft and anti-Christian as a means to unify the Roman Empire under Christian rule.

What do you think? Should this be seen as a form of moral panic or is it too far removed from Goode and Ben Yehuda's (1994) five criteria for a moral panic?

15. Salem Witch Trials

The Salem Witch Trials of 1692 – 1693 is another moral panic that is widely discussed as one of the examples of how this concept has recurred since the beginning of time.

The Witch Trials are an example of the identification of a minority group (women) for the generation of fear and, arguably, [social control](#). Women who act outside of their gender roles can be targeted as witches, the folk devils of the times.

During the era of the Salem Witch Trials, fear was whipped up about women who would conduct dark magic and have pacts with the devil. Clearly, they were wrong. Generally, we believe witchcraft is a non-existent concept whipped up by

irrational people, yet witches were a convenient folk devil that could be targeted at the time.



16. Sexual Revolution

The 1950s were a period of particular conservatism across the Western world. But in the mid-1960s, a new sexual revolution spread through society. Youths were revolting against the perceived oppression from the conservative establishment, and central to their revolution was assertion of feminist and sexual freedoms.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s was met with worry and fear from the establishment media who reported on the erosion of the moral order and (in particular) the dangers of premarital sex (Irvine, 2006). Fear of the spread of STIs and rising use of pornography was seen as potentially causing corruption of society.

According to Girvin (2008), this hysteria about youth sex took on its own identity in Catholic Ireland where the accessibility of contraception was a key culprit.

17. Columbine Massacre

The Columbine High School Massacre in the United States was one of the first in a spate of mass shootings in the United States that intensified in the early 2000s and has continued to this day.

The interesting feature of the Columbine moral panic was not that it involved panic *about* mass shootings (which many would consider to be a legitimate

moral concern in the US), but the *blame* that was placed at the feet of Goth shooters such as Marilyn Manson.



There was even an ABC News 20/20 program about “The Goth Phenomenon” exploring how the shooters were into Goth music. The fear painted Goth culture as having no redeeming qualities and promoting moral degeneracy.

Later, Michael Moore released a documentary film that included an interview with Manson. In the video, Moore and Manson critiqued the media and political backlash as a cynical attempt to blame youth culture rather than address gun culture and the lack of a social safety net in the United States.

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Criticisms Of Moral Panic Theory

Political Bias – It’s evident in this discussion that there is plenty of opportunities to be accused of being politically biased. And it’s true: the entire concept of moral panic has a general theme. Usually, it’s perceived that the *conservatives* are causing the panic while the *liberals* are the rational actors pushing back against exaggerated fear mongering. This, I think, is a legitimate criticism of the theory.

Devaluing Moral Concerns – If the theory goes too far in attacking conservatives, a potential criticism from conservatives is that the theory is an attempt by liberals to devalue their concerns. Some things in society *are* morally questionable. If we draw a moral line and people in society cross it, then that might be worthy of media discussion.



Subjectivity – What constitutes a moral panic is very subjective. Some people emphasize the threats of certain things (youth culture, music, uncouth ideas) in their minds more than others. So, one person's moral panic is another person's legitimate concern!

Conclusion

The above examples of moral panic present an introduction to some of the most typical types of folk devils you will come across. Clearly, there are some repeated culprits that the media and society tend to get hysterical about: youths, queer people, migrants, religious minorities, and musicians among them.

Moral panics will continue from one generation to the next. It appears it's very difficult for us to break the cycles of fear and hysteria that plague us and that are fuelled by profit-motivated media outlets.

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Dr. Chris Drew is the founder of the Helpful Professor. He holds a PhD in education and has published over 20 articles in scholarly journals.



He is the former editor of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education.

3 Thoughts On “17 Famous Moral Panic Examples”

TOM

NOVEMBER 19, 2022 AT 12:28 PM



There are 3 moral panics in the last 60 years where the media heavily obsessed on creating a hysterical narrative and that narrative affected the entire society. Of course, there are many small varying types of localized moral panics. But only these three, are where the media obsessed for day after day lasting for several years.

- Trump Derangement Syndrome
- Metoo is a subset of Trump Derangement Syndrome
- Mc Martin Pre-School Trial
- Nixon Watergate

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CHRIS DREW (PHD)

NOVEMBER 19, 2022 AT 11:52 PM

Hi Tom,

Thanks for sharing. These are good examples of moral panic perpetrated by the liberal media in the United States.

Interestingly, these ones are not about youth, but more of an ideological angle. For balance, I wouldn't discount the fact that conservative media also participates in moral panics. The idea that there is a "war on Christmas" could also be considered a moral panic.



Regard,

Chri

[Edit](#)

[Reply](#)

CRAIG YOUNG

JANUARY 27, 2023 AT 1:55 AM

Sometimes, it's interesting to watch attempted moral panics actually fail. For example, down here in New Zealand, conservative Christian pressure groups are trying to copy US and UK counterparts and create momentum when it comes to transgender school attendance, drag shows and LGBT-inclusive educational content. None of them have worked. Mainstream politicians and media outlets have ignored them and thus, they've been deprived of momentum, mass mobilisation, enhancement within public perception, credibility and legislative denouement.

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