



18 Major Elements Of Culture (Explained For Students!)

By Chris Drew (PhD) / December 14, 2022



Elements of culture include our norms, languages, rituals, holidays, food and diet, art, and architecture.

It's often hard to picture what a culture will look like. There are so many subtle things that inform our cultural identities. But the above elements can help us visualize some key building blocks of any culture.



18 Elements Of Culture

1. Norms

Every culture has its own norms. Norms comes from the same origin as the word 'normal'. Our cultural norms are the things we do that seem normal or natural within our culture.

But different cultures will have different norms. That's why in your own culture you may feel comfortable and completely 'normal', but when you travel to another culture, you might seem a little strange!

Think about, for example, eating with a fork. This is a norm in Western cultures. But go to parts of Asia and they might think you're a little weird, or even have poor dexterity, because you don't know how to use chopsticks. Chopsticks are **the norm** in many Asian cultures.

Other norms include ways of saying 'hello' and 'goodbye', how to dress in the workplace, and even which side of the footpath you should walk on!

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2. Languages



Most cultures are brought together by a common language and way of speaking.

But even within languages (like English or French) there are regional dialects. And this is often where cultures express themselves most.

We will often identify common euphemisms within a cultural group, for example.

American culture has euphemisms like:

- **A home run** – This baseball idiom means to have an amazing success. This comes from baseball.
- **It grinds my gears** – A euphemism for being annoyed by something. When I lived in England, they found it funny that I used this term!
- **Monday-morning quarterback** – This is a person who judges something after the event with the benefit of hindsight. This comes from US Football.

By contrast, Australian culture has its own euphemisms like:

- **Flat out like a lizard drinking** – To be very busy.
- **Chuck a sickie** – To call in sick from work for a day.
- **You little ripper** – An exclamation used when you are excited by something.

3. Festivals



Cultures often celebrate their uniqueness and identities through festivals. The festivals often show-off the clothing and outfits of a culture, as well as the food and music.

Cultural festivals are also very regularly (but not always) oriented around religious beliefs or superstitions.

An example of a cultural festival that's linked to superstition is Día de los Muertos, a festival in Mexico designed to celebrate and commemorate their deceased loved ones.

In the United States, festivals are often oriented around music, such as the famous Burning Man festival.

Read More: [Examples of Cultures](#).

4. Rituals And Ceremonies

Cultural rituals and ceremonies are similar to festivals but often have a more solemn and commemorative element.

In the United States, we could consider **Veteran's Day** to be an important national ritual to remember fallen soldiers. While this isn't religious, it's still very important to the national culture.

Another common ritual is to **lower a flag to half mast** as a sign of mourning.

But rituals can also be intertwined with other parts of culture such as religion.



For example, when someone dies, we often have a **funeral** for them. This is usually in a Church or other place of worship. In India, the cremation is often a much more central part of the burial ritual than in Western nations.

5. Holidays

Some cultures have very important holidays where everyone decides not to work for the day.

In the UK, which has its own national culture but also shares elements of a Western cultural identity, they celebrate what's called **bank holidays**.

Bank holidays are days that everyone gets off to rest and relax.

Thanksgiving is a common holiday in the United States that's not celebrated in many other countries. It has its origins in the founding of the nation as well as a harvest celebration.

6. Pastimes

All cultures have their own unique pastimes. These often revolve around sports but also could include activities like hiking and following certain television shows!

Baseball is called "America's Pastime" because it's so popular in the United States.



Another cultural pastime (or, rather, [subculture](#) pastime) is video gaming in South Korea. Being incredibly popular there, it has come to be associated with South Korean youth.

In the 21st Century, where sub-cultures and [countercultures](#) are emerging online via [digital media](#), shared pastimes are becoming increasingly important in bringing together disparate people to form cultural groups, such as cosplay and blogging cultures.

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7. Food

Many cultures develop their own tastes for particular foods and diets.

Famously Italian culture is oriented around coffee, pasta, and pizza.

Japanese culture is well-known for sushi and other seafood and salmon-based dishes.

Mexican culture is well-known for its spicy foods and tacos. Interestingly, the south of the United States has appropriated parts of Mexican culture into its own cultural dishes, often considered **Tex-Mex**. This is an example of [cultural diffusion](#).

8. Architecture



When traveling the world, you can see different architectural influences in different countries. Here, we can see how culture shapes architectural choices.

Head to old Soviet countries and there is a lot of solid concrete architecture, tall buildings, and grey colors. The architecture here reflects the communist political ideology that was predominant in Eastern European culture in the mid-20th Century.

Other parts of Eastern Europe, like Prague, are influenced by an older Gothic style architecture. This architecture stems from the Goths who were the [dominant culture](#) in the region in the late Middle Ages.

9. Religions

While religion and culture are different concepts, they also overlap a lot. Cultures are often built upon religions over hundreds of years.

Many people in the Western culture believe it's built upon Christianity. While it's more complex than that (secular enlightenment philosophy also had a huge influence), it's true that Christianity and Western culture are traditionally intertwined.

For example, some in the United States credit its rapid rise in the 19th and 20th Centuries to the 'protestant work ethic'.

There are cultures in India strongly influenced by Hinduism and many in the Arabian peninsula are strongly influenced by Islam and its values.



10. Values

Many cultures coalesce around a certain set of values. In the West, individual liberty has been a central cultural marker since the enlightenment.

Individual liberty is particularly prominent in American culture, whereas just north in Canada, social democratic values tend to be more prominent.

In China, dominant values tend to be more conservative and individual liberty is a secondary concern to the integrity of the national character, currently highly oriented around the ruling party.

11. Taboos

Cultural taboos are things that are considered shocking or shameful within a culture.

An [examples of an American taboo](#) is not tipping the waitress. If you failed to tip the waitress, you would be very much frowned upon.

Other nations, like New Zealand, do not have tipping as part of the culture. Therefore, a New Zealander coming to the United States might get a little culture shock!



Another [cultural taboo example](#) is men wearing shorts in Morocco. Westerners might find it quite normal, but shorts in Morocco are often seen as too informal, especially among older generations.

12. Sports

Sports help us come together as a culture. They can also help us transcend cultures to get to know others.

Cricket, for example, is very popular in India, and a prominent cultural pastime. But it is also shared by Australia, creating a link between many people who would identify as ethnic Hindus and those who would identify as ethnic Western Christians, who would otherwise be disconnected.

In the United States, we'd see Baseball and American football as central to American culture.

Association football (soccer) is hugely popular in many cultures around the world, which is why it has the nickname "the world game".

13. Clothing And Outfits

The clothes we wear might seem normal within our culture but strange or even 'dress-ups' in another culture.

For example, in Pakistan, men often wear traditional the shalwar kameez, whereas in Western contexts they might wear a suit jacket and tie.

For women, dresses are quite traditional in Western culture, whereas in some Islamic cultures women will often traditionally wear a hijab.



You may notice this traditional cultural attire being worn at festivals and ceremonies where people come together to celebrate their tradition.

14. Music

Unique music tastes and preferences become dominant in some cultures.

Southern USA culture embraces country music, for example, while the UK is famous for its pop rock music stemming from the influence of the Beatles.

Head to [Japan](#) and you will find traditional instrumental music played on Japanese string instruments such as the Shamisen, Shakuhachi, or Koto.

15. Social Hierarchy

Different cultures have their own ways of organizing society into hierarchies. A hierarchy is needed to help a culture sort out who will be the decision-makers and get preferential treatment in social situations.

For example, conservative cultures tend to prefer men as leaders at the expense of women. But, they may also give preferential treatment to women and children when it comes to comforts and healthcare.



As another example, some societies sort out their social hierarchy through tribal rights or birthright, such as in kingdoms and monarchies. By contrast, other cultures have traditions of sorting out who will have power through democratic elections.

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16. Symbols

Traditional symbols of cultural groups include the flag of a culture as well as elements like national birds or flowers.

The culture of the United States is identifiable by symbols like the star spangled banner and bald eagle. Up North in Canada, you might see the maple leaf as a national and cultural symbol.

For Chinese people, national symbols might include the Chinese dragon, panda bear, or Chinese lantern.

17. Dance

Cultures also develop their own dance preferences. If you don't dance in the same way as the rest of the cultural group, you might look a bit funny on the dance floor!

In North America, young people often dance in 'mosh pits', bouncing up and down to the music. Head to South America, and you're likely to find people of all

ages dancing tango instead. Not only this, but they'll likely be dancing to different types of music.



There are also traditional dances, such as the traditional dance of Indigenous cultures in Australia and Canada.

18. Art

Even the artistic preferences of cultures can differ. Art works of France are closely associated with famous artists like Monet and Matisse, whereas [Turkish art](#) tends to be more associated with miniatures, marbling, and calligraphy.

Traditional Australian Aboriginal art embraces dot painting, earthy colors, and artwork that depicts traditional 'dreaming' stories.

Traditional Chinese art is called *guó huà* and associated with gentle, fine strokes often painted on thin tissue paper or silk.

Culture Vs Cultural Identity

A culture is a group of people who tend to share the same cultural elements (18 of which are listed above).

A cultural identity is the individual's sense of who they are. It involves the cultural elements you identify with that.



Your cultural identity is part of who you are. It shows the 'in groups' you identify with and the values you hold. Generally, if you identify as being a part of a culture, you endorse many or all of the cultural elements which it connotes.

Culture Vs Nation Vs Religion

Cultures, nations, and religions are intertwined but not the same thing.

A culture is a group of people who identify with one another due to common values, beliefs, arts, music, sport, architecture, and pastimes.

A nation is a political entity recognized as being in control of a defined geographical area.

But since the rise of nation-states, nations often develop cultural identities. This doesn't mean nations and cultures are the same thing, but nations cohere around a culture.

National laws will often embrace and promote the dominant culture, such as by creating national holidays so people can celebrate the dominant culture's festivals.

A religion is a philosophical entity whose members share a belief one or more a higher powers or Gods.

As religion was a primary organizing system for societies for many centuries, cultures grew with and around religions. Thus, today, many cultures contain

dominant religious beliefs as well as festivals, values, and norms that can be traced back to a religion that is dominant within the cultural grouping.



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Conclusion

Culture has many elements which, combined, create a coherent cultural identity. Often, we only personally identify with some elements of the culture. But, we can usually identify dominant elements of our culture, even if we only choose to participate in a few of them.

This shows how culture is fluid and hard to pin down. It changes with each generation.

Nevertheless, by looking at examples of the elements of culture, we can reflect on how many complex elements intertwine to create cultural identities.

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