

Cultural Deviance and Criminal Behavior: A Theoretical Review of Subcultural Theories in Criminology

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: Klithih; cultural deviance; subcultural theory of criminology</p> <p>How to cite: Aulia Farah Nizrina., Et., Al. (2025). Cultural Deviance and Criminal Behavior: A Theoretical Review of Subcultural Theories in Criminology. <i>Veteran Law Review</i>. 8(1). 118-128.</p> <p>Received:2025-05-22 Revised:2024-08-14 Accepted:2024-08-16</p>	<p>The klithih phenomenon in Yogyakarta represents a form of street violence perpetrated by adolescents, particularly students, through random acts against the public. This phenomenon should not be viewed merely as juvenile delinquency but also as an expression of cultural deviance rooted in social inequality and structural alienation. This study aims to analyze the klithih phenomenon through the lens of subcultural theory in criminology, particularly the perspectives of Albert Cohen, Cloward & Ohlin, and Walter Miller. The research employs a qualitative-descriptive approach based on an in-depth literature review. The findings reveal that klithih perpetrators establish their own group norms that deviate from mainstream societal values as a form of resistance against the education system, family, and broader society, which they perceive as excluding them from social spaces. Thus, klithih behavior can be understood as an attempt to seek identity, solidarity, and recognition within the context of a deviant subculture. This study recommends community-based preventive approaches, educational reform, youth empowerment, and sustained social interventions as more effective solutions than purely repressive measures.</p>

1. Introduction

Crime is a complex phenomenon that can be understood from various perspectives. Criminology is the scientific study of crime itself. Juvenile delinquency is a complex and evolving social phenomenon that reflects the dynamic changes in a society's social, economic, and cultural landscape (Santoso & Zulfa, 2022).



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In Indonesia, one of the most prominent forms of juvenile delinquency is the phenomenon of *klithih* in Yogyakarta. Originally, the term *klithih* in Javanese had a neutral connotation, referring to the act of wandering aimlessly. However, over time, its meaning has undergone a significant shift, becoming synonymous with acts of street violence committed by youths against random victims, without any clear economic motive. This shift in meaning reflects a profound social and cultural transformation within Yogyakarta's society (Muti'ah et al., 2021).

The *klithih* phenomenon cannot be understood merely as typical juvenile delinquency. A criminological approach, particularly subcultural theory, offers a broader analytical framework to understand this behavior as an expression of cultural deviance (Harahap et al., 2023). Subcultural theory argues that certain groups within society may develop norms and values that differ from, or even contradict, those of the dominant culture.

In the context of *klithih*, the youths involved form a subculture of violence that assigns new meaning to deviant acts as a form of self-expression, group solidarity, and identity-seeking (Santoso & Zulfa, 2022). This subculture does not emerge in a vacuum, but rather as a response to perceived social injustice or oppression. Youths involved in *klithih* often come from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, facing limited access to quality education, economic opportunities, and adequate family support. In such conditions, the violent subculture offers an alternative means of gaining status, recognition, and a sense of belonging that they do not find within the existing social structures.

It is important to note that the *klithih* phenomenon is also influenced by local cultural dynamics and shifting values in Yogyakarta society. Modernization and urbanization have brought significant changes to social structures and traditional values, creating tensions between the younger generation and prevailing norms. In this context, *klithih* can be seen as a form of resistance to social change perceived as threatening to the identity and existence of certain groups. Moreover, the role of social media and information technology also contributes to the spread and normalization of *klithih* behavior. Digital platforms are used by perpetrators to showcase their actions, seek recognition, and recruit new members, thereby reinforcing group cohesion and expanding the reach of this subculture. This illustrates that *klithih* is not merely a local phenomenon, but part of a broader global dynamic involving the interaction between local culture and global technology (Muti'ah et al., 2021).

From a criminological perspective, a purely repressive approach is insufficient to effectively address the *klithih* phenomenon. A more holistic and preventive strategy is required, involving interventions at the individual, family, community, and public policy levels. Inclusive educational programs, youth empowerment, strengthening the role of families, and active community

involvement in creating safe and supportive environments are essential steps in the prevention and mitigation of klithih (Alghzali et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the implementation of a restorative justice approach can serve as an alternative in handling klithih cases. This approach emphasizes the restoration of relationships between offenders, victims, and the community, as well as the rehabilitation of offenders through mediation and dialogue processes. Thus, restorative justice focuses not only on punishment but also on healing and the social reintegration of offenders into society (Pramudita & Azhari, 2025).

In the academic context, studying klithih through the lens of subcultural theory offers important insights into the complexity of juvenile delinquency in Indonesia. The objective of this study is to analyze the klithih phenomenon using a subcultural theory approach, to examine the role of cultural deviance in shaping juvenile criminal behavior, and to provide solution-oriented recommendations for addressing subculture-based criminality. This research not only enriches criminological discourse but also provides an empirical foundation for formulating more effective and responsive policies that address the social dynamics underlying the klithih phenomenon. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from criminology, sociology, psychology, and anthropology is crucial for a comprehensive understanding and response to this issue.

1. Method

At the analysis stage, a descriptive qualitative approach based on in-depth literature study was used to collect all information obtained from the review of literature before drawing conclusions as the final outcome of the research. These conclusions are designed to address the research questions formulated and are aligned with the objectives of the study. This study employs a normative juridical method to obtain its research findings. The selection of this method is based on its focus on analyzing legal norms as stipulated in statutory regulations. In addition, the researcher conducted a literature review to gather references relevant to the issues under study, ensuring that the explanation and analysis processes are supported by reliable sources.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. Cultural Deviance

Cultural deviance occurs when the norms of a particular group conflict with the norms of the wider society. In this context, deviant behavior becomes rational for individuals who have been influenced by those values (Ningtiasih & Saboimah, 2021). The norms that regulate our daily lives are rules that reflect

the attitudes of the groups to which each of us belongs. The purpose of these norms is to define what is considered appropriate or normal behavior and what is regarded as inappropriate or abnormal behavior.

According to Sellin, every group has its own conduct norms, and the conduct norms of one group may conflict with those of another. An individual who follows their group's norms may be seen as committing a crime if those norms contradict the norms of the dominant society. Based on this explanation, the primary difference between a criminal and a non-criminal is that each adheres to a different set of conduct norms.

Sellin distinguishes between primary and secondary conflicts. Primary conflict occurs when the norms of two cultures clash. Such clashes can happen at the border between adjacent cultural areas; when the law of one cultural group expands to include the territory of another; or when members of one group move into another culture. Secondary conflict arises when one culture evolves into several distinct cultures, each with its own set of conduct norms. This type of conflict occurs when a once homogeneous or simple society becomes a complex one, in which multiple social groups continuously develop and norms often lag behind (Santoso & Zulfa, 2022).

According to Albert K. Cohen, the theory of status frustration explains deviant behavior among lower-class youth. He argues that adolescents from lower social classes experience status frustration due to their inability to meet the standards of success defined by middle-class society. In response, they form subcultures with alternative values that reject dominant norms and interpret deviant behavior as a form of self-expression and group solidarity (Fajrin et al., 2024).

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin further developed the differential opportunity theory, which highlights the unequal access to means of achieving socially approved goals within society. They identified three types of subcultures that emerge as adaptations to limited opportunities (Arnold, 2025):

1. Criminal Subculture: Arises in environments with organized criminal structures, where youth learn to commit crimes as a way to gain material rewards.
2. Conflict Subculture: Emerges in areas lacking stable criminal networks, where youth express their frustration through violence and aggression.
3. Retreatist Subculture: Formed by individuals who have failed to achieve goals through both conventional and criminal means, leading them to withdraw and engage in substance abuse or other deviant behaviors.

This theory emphasizes that not only are societal goals unequally distributed,

but so are the means of achieving them, which can foster the development of deviant subcultures.

Walter B. Miller also proposed that the lower-class subculture possesses a distinct set of values known as focal concerns, which include:

- a. Toughness: Emphasis on physical strength and bravery.
- b. Smartness: The ability to display cleverness and cunning.
- c. Excitement: The pursuit of thrills and adventure.
- d. Fate: A belief that life outcomes are determined by external forces beyond individual control.
- e. Autonomy: A desire to resist authority and maintain independence.

These values can encourage delinquent behavior when individuals attempt to conform to the norms of their subculture (Pramono, 2003).

2.2. Discussion: The Klithih Phenomenon as a Form of Youth Cultural Deviance

The klithih phenomenon in Yogyakarta cannot be narrowly interpreted as a typical case of juvenile delinquency or merely individual criminal behavior. Klithih represents a complex expression of cultural deviance that emerges within broader social, economic, and cultural contexts. From the perspective of subcultural theory, this behavior is a response to structural pressures and social inequalities experienced by youth from marginalized communities.

The klithih subculture grows among adolescents who feel alienated from mainstream social structures. Their inability to meet social expectations rooted in middle-class values—such as academic achievement, economic status, and family stability—leads to status frustration. As explained by Albert K. Cohen, such frustration fosters the development of alternative subcultures in which dominant societal norms are rejected, and deviant behavior is redefined as a form of identity affirmation, self-expression, and group solidarity.

In the context of klithih, violence is not merely an act of aggression but serves as a symbol of courage and a means of gaining social recognition within the subcultural group. These acts are often carried out randomly against strangers, indicating that economic motives are not the primary driving force. Instead, the motivation lies in acquiring status and a sense of belonging. In other words, violence becomes a form of social communication within a subculture that rejects mainstream norms.

The formation of this violent subculture is deeply connected to the reality of social inequality. Klithih perpetrators typically come from low-income backgrounds, with limited access to quality education, job opportunities, and family support. In such conditions, deviant subcultures offer an alternative form of identity that is unattainable within formal social structures.

Beyond structural factors, klithih also reflects local cultural dynamics disrupted by modernization and urbanization. Rapid social changes have created a value gap between generations. The tension between traditional values and the demands of urban culture has led to disorientation among youth, who then seek identity anchors within alternative subcultures like klithih. This phenomenon can be seen as a form of resistance to social changes perceived as threatening to the identity and existence of certain groups.

Furthermore, the development of information technology and social media plays a significant role in amplifying and normalizing klithih practices. Violent acts are often documented and circulated on digital platforms as a means of gaining reputation and recognition. In this regard, social media becomes a space for reproducing deviant culture, while simultaneously strengthening group cohesion and expanding the network of violent subcultures among youth. A purely repressive approach that relies solely on law enforcement has proven inadequate in addressing the klithih phenomenon. A more holistic and preventive strategy is needed—one that involves interventions at multiple levels, including the individual, family, school, community, and public policy. Inclusive education programs, youth empowerment, strengthening family roles, and active community involvement in creating safe and supportive environments are key steps toward prevention.

The application of restorative justice also offers a more humane alternative in dealing with klithih offenders. This approach emphasizes the restoration of relationships between offenders, victims, and the community, and provides space for social rehabilitation through mediation processes. Thus, restorative justice focuses not only on punishment but also on recovery and the social reintegration of the offender.

In conclusion, klithih can be understood as a form of cultural deviance rooted in complex social, economic, and cultural dynamics. An interdisciplinary approach—integrating criminology, sociology, psychology, and anthropology—is essential for comprehensively understanding and addressing this issue. Academic studies on klithih not only contribute to the development of criminological discourse in Indonesia but also provide an empirical foundation for formulating more effective, responsive, and humane policies in dealing with juvenile delinquency.

2.3. The Klithih Phenomenon as Cultural Deviance

Klithih, manifested as random acts of violence committed by students, reflects the existence of group norms that deviate from those of the general society. Within this subculture, violent behavior:

- a. Becomes a measure of status and bravery.
- b. Functions as a "group ritual."

- c. Is immortalized through social media to gain reputation.

2.4. The Klithih Phenomenon as Cultural Deviance

Klithih as an Expression of Social Resistance

Many klithih perpetrators come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds:

- a. They feel unable to meet school demands.
- b. They lack family support.
- c. They feel unrecognized by society.

Violence becomes a means of asserting existence and resisting a system perceived as oppressive. This aligns with the theories of Cohen and Cloward & Ohlin.

2.5. Criminological Analysis

- a. Delinquent Subculture (Cohen): Offenders experience status frustration and form groups with counter-normative values.
- b. Conflict Subculture (Cloward & Ohlin): Klithih emerges in environments lacking access to both legitimate and illegitimate means of success, making conflict the primary form of expression.
- c. Focal Concerns (Miller): Values such as toughness and trouble dominate within the subculture of klithih perpetrators.

2.6. The following are the legal foundations related to the case study of klithih

A. Child Protection and Handling of Juvenile Offenders

- 1) Law No. 11 of 2012 on the Juvenile Criminal Justice System (UU SPPA)
 - a) Serves as the primary legal basis for handling criminal cases involving children or adolescents.
 - b) Emphasizes a restorative justice approach and diversion (diverting case settlement from judicial proceedings to non-judicial processes).
 - c) Article 6 states that the juvenile justice system aims to provide special protection for children.
- 2) Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection (amended by Law No. 35 of 2014 and Law No. 17 of 2016)
 - a) Affirms the state's obligation to protect children from violence, exploitation, neglect, and other forms of abuse.
 - b) Articles 76C and 76D regulate the prohibition of children's involvement in violent and criminal acts.

B. General Criminal Acts and Law Enforcement

- 1) The Indonesian Penal Code (KUHP)
 - a) Contains articles related to assault, mob violence, murder, and acts of violence in public places, which apply to perpetrators, including

juveniles.

C. Control of Violent Acts and Public Order

- 1) Regional Regulations and Executive Instructions (specific to the Special Region of Yogyakarta)

Examples include:

- a) Regional Regulation of Yogyakarta No. 2 of 2017 on Public Order and Community Peace.
- b) Governor of Yogyakarta's Instruction No. 4/INSTR/2022 on Combating Street Crime (*Klithih*). These local regulations and policies serve as legal instruments for law enforcement and prevention of the *klithih* phenomenon at the regional level.

D. Violence Prevention and Social Empowerment

- 1) Law No. 11 of 2009 on Social Welfare

- a) Provides the legal foundation for programs aimed at empowering vulnerable children and adolescents.
- b) Relevant for community-based interventions and social empowerment efforts in preventing *klithih* behavior.

E. Restorative Approach

The restorative justice approach mentioned in your background is also reinforced by Regulation of the Indonesian National Police No. 8 of 2021 on the Handling of Criminal Offenses Based on Restorative Justice. Provides a procedural foundation for the police to resolve cases through mediation, dialogue, and reconciliation between the offender, the victim, and the community.

2.7. Solutions And Recommendations For Improvement

A. Educational and Social Approaches

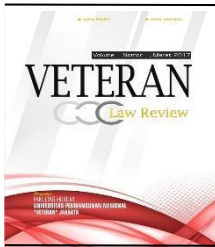
- 1) Educational reform is needed to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of students from vulnerable social backgrounds.
- 2) Strengthening guidance counseling and character education in schools.
- 3) Providing creative outlets for youth outside of school (such as art clubs, sports, and community groups).

B. Community-Based Interventions

- 1) Community policing: Police officers actively engage in building social relationships with students and the community.
- 2) Mentoring programs for high-risk youth involving local figures or school alumni.
- 3) Revitalizing public spaces to prevent them from becoming gathering points for *klithih* groups.

C. Reorientation of Legal Handling

- 1) Offender treatment should not be solely repressive but should also incorporate restorative approaches.



- 2) Social rehabilitation using psychological and family-based methods.
- 3) Monitoring and evaluation of schools as frontline institutions for early prevention.

3. Conclusion

The klithih phenomenon in Yogyakarta cannot be merely understood as individual criminal acts or ordinary juvenile delinquency. From the perspective of subcultural theory in criminology, klithih represents a manifestation of cultural deviance, wherein a group of adolescents forms a subculture with values that differ from and even oppose those of the dominant society. Values such as group solidarity, bravery, the pursuit of social status, and resistance to authority give distinct meaning to the violent acts they commit.

This deviance does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it develops within a broader social context: economic marginalization, educational exclusion, weak family supervision, and a lack of safe and positive spaces for youth to express their identities. In this framework, criminal behavior is not merely the result of rational choice or individual impulse but is also a response to ongoing structural and cultural pressures.

Through the lens of subcultural theory, it becomes clear that perpetrators live in environments that cultivate alternative value systems such as toughness, smartness, and autonomy which are normalized and even praised within their subcultural context. These values emerge as a response to the failure to achieve status through conventional means offered by the dominant society.

By understanding klithih as a social and cultural symptom, its prevention and response strategies cannot rely solely on repressive or punitive measures. Instead, it is essential to recognize that such deviant behavior arises as a way for youth to fulfill their needs for identity, recognition, and existence within a society that has failed to provide them with healthy and constructive opportunities for development.

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