Subcultures, Neotribes, Countercultures, Or New Social Movements: the Case of Voluntary Simplicity

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The traditional view of a consumption subculture refers to a distinct subgroup of society that shares a common interest in and commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Consumption subcultures are characterized by hierarchical social structures and sets of shared beliefs, values, and modes of symbolic expression (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). On the one hand, these characteristics are clearly visible within voluntary simplicity communities, groups, and consumers. The cultural practice of voluntarily consuming less, or downshifting (Schor 1998), has its own language, rituals, conventions, associations, clubs, magazines, workshops, websites, and core participants, in fact, voluntary simplicity leaders are valorized as heroes or legends (e.g., Cecile Andrews, Duane Elgin, and David Shi).

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
Sub-Cultures of Consumption: A Critical Reappraisal
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SPECIAL SESSION OVERVIEW
The central aim of this session was to ask if it is possible to recover a critical theoretical understanding of sub-cultures that has been systematically eroded by consumer research studies on marketplace based sub-cultures. Historically sub-cultural studies have emphasized the negotiation or rejection of dominant (middle class) ideologies. Locating sub-cultures within a liberatory consumption framework negates or overlooks how consumption practices, sub-cultural or otherwise, reproduce dominant capitalistic and economic ideologies. Consumption is a site where power and ideology circulate (Denzin 2001). Consumers can be liberated and empowered but consumption can also ‘demean, disenfranchise… essentialize and stereotype’ (Denzin 2001, p.325).

The three papers in this special session explored in different ways the tension between oppositional practices and consumer culture. Goulding and Saren, explored the way that elements of Goth culture have become commodified, packaged and marketed to the mainstream. Canniford, Newton and Shankar, continued with this theme in their analysis of surf culture and suggested that the ability to surf cannot be marketized, and still acts as site for the rejection of mainstream ideology. The final paper by Cherrier and Murray, examined how new social movements, like the voluntary simplicity movement, reject consumerist ideologies in favour of ‘less is more’.

The discussant, Richard Elliott, reminded us that the Birmingham School that spawned many of the most important sub-cultural studies in the 1960s and 1970s, had at its heart a critical emancipatory agenda that he felt was lacking from these papers.

References

“From Rebellion To Commodification: The Case of ‘Goth’”
Christina Goulding and Michael Saren

The traditional neo-Marxist frameworks for conceptualizing subcultures as the catalyst for counter-hegemonic strategies of resistance (Kellner, 1995; Hebdige, 1979/1997; Frith 1980/1997) has in recent years come under challenge. This is largely due to their lack of attention to the fragmented, multi-ethnic, multi-class, non-gendered, and transitory nature of what might be termed ‘postmodern’ subcultures (Bennett, 1999). It is now generally recognized that subcultures are also cultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Goulding, Shankar and Elliott 2002; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2001, 2002) that involve innovators and the creation of markets, products and services to meet the needs of these markets. Consequently groups that may appear marginal or deviant are worthy of examination as many undergo a process of commodification and ultimately diffuse into mainstream consumer society. This paper focuses on this process. We take as our basis for analysis the ‘Gothic’ subculture, a micro-community that emerged during the late 1970s and continues to flourish in a number of refashioned incarnations today. Goth is a subculture closely associated with the wearing of black, an interest in the ‘darker’ side of life and death, a musical aesthetic and with the cult of the vampire.

Data collection: The discussion will draw upon the findings of research conducted primarily at the bi-annual Whitby Goth festival. Our data collection consisted of participatory observation at two of the weeklong festivals, a series of open and structured interviews with participants and the collection of visual data through video recordings and photographs. Whilst our analysis, which was the product of a grounded theory process of inductive coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), identified a range of themes underpinning the experience, the changing nature of the material culture and the marketization or commodification of the subculture will form the basis for discussion in this special session. This centres largely around three distinct stages of development.

Stage 1: Rebellion: The Gothic subculture emerged out of the dying embers of Punk Rock in the early 1980s at a London nightclub called the ‘Bat Cave’. These pale faced, black-swatthed, night dwellers saw themselves as outside of the mainstream but bound together by common passions, interests and mutually shared activities (Wenger, 1999). However, whilst regarded as outsiders, they welcomed this segregation and saw participation as a form of rebellion against the mundane. Goth, in the early days was an ordered whole, with each part of the subculture fitting together in a homological style (Willis, 1978) and at this stage in the development Goths displayed elements of conscious counter hegemonic strategies for rebelling (Kellner, 1995; Hebdige 1979/1997; Frith, 1996; Willis 1978, 1990). However, as in the case of so many other subcultures, there was a gradual adoption process by new members who did not necessarily share the original motives of the innovators (Goulding et al, 2002). According to Hebdige (1979/1997) this adoption process usually occurs when what was once considered deviant becomes familiar and marketable, giving rise to a process of recuperation which has two characteristic forms. The first is the commodity form where there is a conversion of sub-cultural signs such as music and clothes into mass produced objects. The second is the ideological form, or the labelling or redefinition of what was once considered deviant.

Stage 2: Fragmentation: Fragmentation is a concept endemic to contemporary or postmodern consumer societies (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Brown, 1995). Fragmentation consists of a series of interrelated ideas, the breaking down of markets into smaller and smaller groups and correspondingly, the proliferation of a greater number of products to serve the increasing segments. This is true of Goth, which has evolved and fragmented in terms of music and fashion. At this stage the commodity becomes the key defining signifier of group membership and affiliation for the various factions within the subculture as consumers actively engage in a process of co-production as they define and shape the styles that give rise to the various internal identities. At some point, the equality and levelling process characteristic of the formative stage gives way to the development of hierarchies, based largely on the degree of subcultural capital possessed by the individual (Thornton, 1996) and the commodification of image. This is usually the catalyst for the final stage which is commodification and appropriation by the mainstream.

Stage 3: Commodification and appropriation by the mainstream: Today the Gothic subculture is well served by a burgeoning retail and leisure industry. It is a culture of consumption, which has
moved beyond individual creativity to a two-sided system of production and consumption (Lash, 1990). In essence the raw energy or the original life-force of the subculture is gradually being replaced by the reification of symbols and products (Bertens, 1995; Baudrillard, 1990) as the mainstream recognize the lucrative potential of what was once considered deviant and marginal. Today Goth has entered the mainstream The effect of this diffusion is accessibility and even respectability on the part of new entrants who bring with them their own preconceptions making the experience a two way process of appropriation. Entrepreneurs flourish and the marketing machine moves into action.

Contemporary subcultures are changing. It is no longer possible to define them simply on the basis of social class, age or gender. Nor can we understand them in terms of the oppressed using the only strategies of resistance open to them to strike a blow against the dominant hierarchies of control. As our analysis of Goth will attempt to show, these micro-communities may start off as rebellious collectives, but eventually evolve, fragment and grow. Values, beliefs and forms of expression change, as do the symbolic meanings and the nature of the commodities used to support and maintain the subculture. We also need to reconsider the nature of resistance and redefine it in the broader sense as an action that may have multiple layers. Moreover, Goth is now based on the commodity form and its influence has been far reaching in terms of music, style and dress. Our argument is that marketers can learn lessons from the creativity and innovation shown by these new communities and there is value in analyzing the progression from the ‘margins to the mainstream’.

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“Over The Counter Culture?”
Robin Canniford, Tim Newton and Avi Shankar

It is a popular argument that we currently exist in a society in which identity, meaning making and status are largely mediated through purchasable goods and services. What kinds of social groups exist under these conditions? How has the market-oriented social world affected subjectivity? A variety of theoretical standpoints have been posed to account for these questions. Sociologists and consumer researchers confer with notions of weakened social bonds, transience or ephemeral experience of identity as characterising culture (see Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Bennett, 1999; Firat & Dholakia, 1998).

However, this paper argues that social forms may not be entirely reduced to a consumer-cultural logic. In many cases, subcultures draw on other, more traditional types of practice to create shared senses of meaning and identity (Irwin, 1973; Pearson, 1979; Kates, 2002). These correspond to the notions of subculture created by the Chicago School, The Birmingham School and more recent social theorists (Cohen, 1955; Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1995). There continue to exist specific enclaves of individuals who through their practice, rituals and mythologies are able to share identity and dispositions, exhibit strong and enduring social ties, and construct themselves as oppositional to other groups.

Through a historical and ethnographic examination of surf culture this paper recommends a treatment of the subcultural concept which acknowledges that subcultures:

- Create self-referential frameworks (see Bourdieu, 1984).
- Are experienced through enduring dispositions, ideologies, rituals and subcultural capital (see Thornton, 1995).
- Affect subjectivity.
- Establish a strong, axiomatic sense of meaning and identity (Kates, 2002; Irwin, 1973).
- Establish strong social ties (Kates, 2002; Willis, 1977).
- Are historical, networked processes (see Elias, 2000; Latour, 1996).
- May be constructed in opposition to a ‘dominant’ culture (Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979).
- Are negotiated at various interconnected levels: media, politics, sport, market.

However:

- They are not static or unified (Redhead, 1998; Martin, 2002). Politics and ideology are expressed as a function of subculture’s position with dominant society.
- Their practice and dispositional elements are not isolated to leisure time or leisure space.
- Neither are they necessarily isolated to any particular time or space.
• They are not isolated to specific demographics–class, age, gender, and race.
• There may be complex relationships between different types of capital and interests.

From these starting points we can begin to observe subcultures as dynamic rhetorical devices; stories imposed by observers in order to make sense of specific cultural actions (Pearson, 1979). As rhetorical devices, subcultures serve to distinguish practices, both for academics and members of scenes. The features of subcultures that serve this function largely depend on shared self-referential schemes (Bourdieu, 1984), primary frameworks (Goffman, 1969), subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995), rituals and practices. Individuals are able to use these to construct meaning, establish identity and negotiate status with one another.

Whilst this paper supports the continued use of the concept, some of the previous literature on subculture is criticised. Moreover their relationship with social time and space is more complex than has been recognised by many previous accounts. Subcultures are not isolated politically or historically from general social shifts or from natural acts (Latour, 1996). Subcultures are not isolated in time or space. Rather they are networked and historical processes subject to development and figurational negotiation with other powerful groups (see Elias, 2000).

This is not to say that the market has no influence on subcultures. Subcultural capital may be put up for sale within other cultures and this can have vigorous impact on the scene in question (Canniford & Layne, 2004). In the case of surfing, the marketisation of subcultural capital encouraged a change in the lifestyle, sporting, working and political positions of many surfers and created scenes within the scene: sub-sub cultures. Surfing has been transformed from a playful, carnival activity into a codified and civilised sport culture. In the course of this process, researchers should consider individual’s working lives, their consumption habits, ritualised elements and mythologies that can not be entirely regarded as consumables, as well as the status of the dominant culture. This being the case, subcultures could be viewed to some extent as continuous with other social forms rather than entirely discreet.

References:


“Subcultures, Neotribes, Countercultures or New Social Movements? The Case of Voluntary Simplicity”
Hélène Cherrier and Jeff B. Murray

The traditional view of a consumption subculture refers to a distinct subgroup of society that shares a common interest in and commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Consumption subcultures are characterized by hierarchical social structures and sets of shared beliefs, values, and modes of symbolic expression (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). On the one hand, these characteristics are clearly visible within voluntary simplicity communities, groups, and consumers. The cultural practice of voluntarily consuming less, or downshifting (Schor 1998), has its own language, rituals, conventions, associations, clubs, magazines, workshops, websites, and core participants, in fact, voluntary simplicity leaders are valorized as heroes or legends (e.g., Cecile Andrews, Duane Elgin, and David Shl).

On the other hand, critics of the concept “subculture” suggest that the term, by itself, is contested in that it fails to capture the rich diversity and conflict that characterizes consumption activities. Drawing on postmodern perspectives, these theorists argue that subcultures have fragmented to the point where there is no longer an identifiable subgroup sharing a common interest. This perspective shifts the focus to localized subject positions that have developed around fashion, lifestyle, and identity. Maffesoli (1996, Chapter 1) refers to these subject positions as neotribes or emotional communities. This implies that the term “subculture,” and the parent culture against which it is defined, are not coherent and homogenous formations that can be clearly demarcated (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003). Indeed, the phrase “voluntary simplicity” is an overarching label for a very diverse group (e.g., a search of “voluntary simplicity” on Yahoo results in over 229,000 hits).

A third concept that is related to these first two is “counterculture.” Advocates of this concept argue that “neotribes” describe such small fragmented groupings, everything becomes a neotribe. If this is the case, the concept does not draw attention to discrete phenomena and therefore fails to generate new explanatory insights. In addition, both the concepts “subculture” and “neotribe” are purely descriptive concepts, lacking any type of critical dimension. The concept “counterculture” draws attention to a variety of lifestyle movements that resist mainstream consumption lifestyles. These movements all embrace a negative critique in the sense that they are positioned against something. The problem with this concept is that it does not draw attention to those movements that serve as a source of creativity and social change. Many consumer movements embrace a positive critique in the sense that they envision new consumption lifestyles and deepen the possibilities for expression by adding to the aesthetic resources of the culture.
Thus, we argue that the phrase “new social movement” may be the most generative when theorizing consumption lifestyles. A “generative” concept is one, which generates new ideas, insights, explanations, critiques, relationships, and research agendas. The qualifier “new” enables the concept to question the structural bases for subcultures, and the word “movement” allows for both a positive and negative critique. “Critique” in the sense of evaluative, public, multiactor, multiagenda, oriented to equality and heterogeneous well-being (Haraway 1997, p. 95). Johnson, Larana, and Gusfield (1994) recognize five generative characteristics of the concept new social movements: 1) ideological dimensions are characterized by pluralistic values and ideas with pragmatic orientations; 2) mobilizing factors tend to focus on cultural and symbolic issues that are linked with issues of identity rather than structural or economic concerns; 3) new social movements are “acted out” in individual actions rather than through or among mobilized groups; 4) unlike “social movements,” new social movements often involve day-to-day, personal, and intimate aspects of human life; and finally, 5) new social movements tend to be segmented, diffused, and decentralized. These characteristics are ideal for studying voluntary simplicity and other consumer movements discussed in this special session such as Goths and surfers.

References: