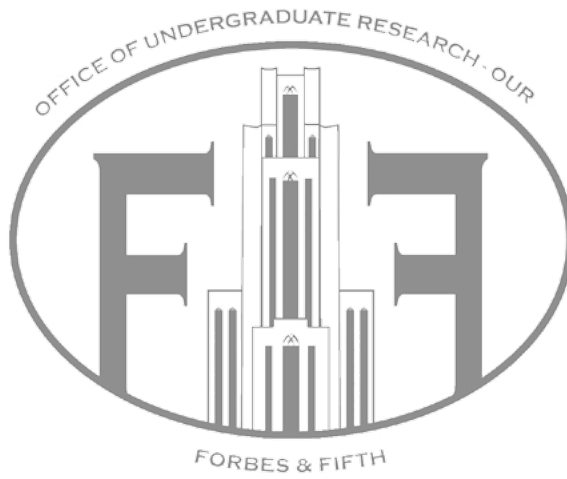


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•••



Postmodern Authenticity and the Hipster Identity

ABSTRACT

Since its introduction into popular culture in the late 1990s, the subcultural identifier and pejorative “hipster” has come to denote a distinct countercultural figure. Known predominantly for their ironic aesthetic style and adulation of esoteric cultural goods, hipsters appear in contemporary media as a regular target of editorial criticism and satire. A concrete understanding of the meaning of the word “hipster” eludes most, though its everyday use is almost invariably as an insult to imply a pseudo-counterculturalism. Two questions motivated this investigation: (1) What facets of hipster culture make it the subject for such unrelenting scorn, and (2) Why do these trends persist through culture almost fifteen years later? Through a content analysis of analytic literature on hipsters, this paper identifies three contradictions in the hipster identity – relations to capitalism, class, and material culture – in order to examine their function within subculture as well as dominant culture. Through the interpretive lens of the postsubculturalist, the hipster is conceived as a postmodern incarnation of subculture, less concerned with politics and collectivism and more concerned with personal style and authentic expression.

INTRODUCTION

The term “hipster” in reference to the contemporary subculture has the unique distinction of occupying the roles of both a group identifier and an archetypal slur. As an identifier, it refers to the creatively-inclined individuals who formed communities within poor urban enclaves – prototypically the Brooklyn borough, Williamsburg, but also New York’s Lower East Side, Capitol Hill in Seattle, Silver Lake in Los Angeles, and the Inner Mission in San Francisco, in the late 90s/early 2000s.¹ Often associated with the phenomenon of gentrification, hipster communities attracted young adults priced out of other city neighborhoods with the skill set to renovate neglected housing. Additionally, these groups often displayed, and became defined by, a shared personal aesthetic of ironically-presented low culture symbols and appropriated countercultural fashions. The organization of their appearance is often framed as part of a greater behavioral trend of discovering, filtering, and

assessing obscure cultural products.

As a slur, “hipster” is often applied to the aforementioned subculture as well as to individuals in more remote geographic locations, connoting an ethos of superficiality and self-absorption. In this conception, a “hipster” shares appearances and liberal viewpoints of real nonconformists, but is motivated by the desire to create a fashionably rebellious image rather than by genuine radicalism. Often carrying the connotation of inauthenticity, the hipster persona is one that problematically vacillates between attachment to marginalized populations as well as to the dominant class.² Although hipsters take on the symbols of the excluded and self-exiled, they never relinquish their ties to their culturally and economically dominant status.

Both of these etymologies refer to the same cultural figure, although the first is more specific in geographic and temporal location. Hence, the term “hipster” used in this paper refers to both the actual localized communities of “hipsters” and the detached the archetypal derivative referred to as “hipster.” Future references to “the hipster” or “hipster culture” in this paper operate on the understanding of “hipster” as a generalized transgressive identity without regard for historical subjectivities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of hipster as a discrete identity as well as a defined group relies on a reconstruction of the definition of subculture. Since its inception, cultural studies has been a dominating framework in understanding subculture.

Grounded in literary and critical theory (particularly Marxism), early cultural theorists positioned subcultures as cooperative constructional responses of working class individuals to structural problems and contradictions of

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the dominant culture within which they exist. Arguing that through the collective reworking of symbols subcultures attempt to posit solutions to perceived social injustices, cultural studies theory categorized subcul-

tural practice as a conscious, socially-engaged act.

Postsubcultural theory diverges from the traditional conceptualization of subculture offered by Dick Hebdige and other affiliates of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. In the first chapter of *The Post Subcultures Reader*, sociologists David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl proclaim: “the era seems long gone of working-class youth subcultures ‘heroically’ resisting subordination through ‘semiotic guerilla warfare.’ Postsubcultural theorists pose an understanding of subculture as stylistically and individualistically motivated, replacing the ‘romantic’ notion of subculture as a means of subversion, contradiction, and interruption expressed in traditional cultural studies.” Citing changes in technology, consumption, and production techniques, they argue that the cultural paradigm has progressed from modernist enlightenment and industrial order to hyperfragmented relativism, replacing the ideal of homogenized normality with the ideal of individualism through consumerism. As a result, rather than suffering societal estrangement and marginalization, countercultural tendencies and independent thought have transformed into a sanctioned component of conformist lifestyle. Cultural anthropologist Dylan Clark observes:

“Dissident youth subculture is normal and expected, even unwittingly hegemonic. Where long hair and denim once threatened the mainstream, it has become mainstream and so has the very idea of subculture. Not only are deviant styles normalized, but subcultural presence is now taken for granted: the fact of sub-cultures is accepted and anticipated. Subcultures may even serve a useful function for capitalism, by making stylistic innovations that can then become vehicles for new sales. Subcultures became, by the 1970s, if not earlier, a part of everyday life, another category of people in the goings-on of society – part of the landscape, part of daily life, part of hegemonic normality.”³

Postsubculturalists argue that the perspective of subculture as “class-based, oppositional and discrete”⁴ erodes when the distinction between rebels and the rebelled against is lost. The aspirant subculturalist is robbed of his or her agency, and the potential for politically charged

symbols is reduced by the threat of instantaneous conversion into harmless simulacra for the adoption and consumption of popular culture. The existential core of subculture as a system of communal deviant expression is further placed in a position of peril by Western cultural views in regards to authenticity and individuality. Muggleton cites deeply ingrained notions of individuality and unique personal expression as a factor in why rebellious individuals avoid group identification. He argues that “group identifications are therefore resisted because they carry connotations of collective conformity, suggesting a concomitant loss of individuality that renders their members inauthentic.”²⁵ The existence of group boundaries is instead replaced by the “liminal”²⁶ subculture, a heterogeneous collection of radical identities resisting assimilation into a collective subculture. Individuals with a liminal status have transient attachments and higher degrees of personal autonomy, exhibiting markers of a greater subcultural while retaining individual identity. Using the concept of the “liminal” subculture, “hipster” can be understood as a sovereign identity only partially adherent to the mores of a larger culture.

ANALYSIS

The majority of cultural commentary on hipsters is quick to identify contradictions. The most salient of these contradictions can be categorized in relation to capitalism, class, and material culture. Expounded upon in the following subsections are the binaries that characterize hipster critique from the selected literature.

Anti-capitalist/Pro-consumerist

Avid and conspicuous consumption yet palpable disdain for modern corporatism have become a hallmark of contemporary hipster culture. The consumerist image of the hipster encapsulates both the literal aspect of buying material items as well as the consumption of media, art, and nostalgia. These tangible and intangible cultural products are appropriated into the identity of the owner, serving as extensions of a paradoxically nonconformist ethos. Capitalism offers the raw materials, seemingly infinite options to be sifted by the hipster consumer. Local businesses, independent artists or crafters, and thrift stores are preferred retailers although such institutions as *Vice* magazine, American Apparel, *Pitchfork*

Media, and Whole Foods are essential to hipster material culture. Where an item is bought factors into the equation for determining credibility – less ecologically and socially conscious stores such as Walmart are spurned, while establishments offering an alternative consumer experience, one that was differentiated from the harmful practices of modern capitalism (censorship, exploitive labor, questionable agricultural practices, corporatism, etc.), are sought out and patronized.

While previous subcultures have employed consumerist habits for a rebellious end, what most distinguishes hipster culture as pro-consumerist is that consumerism is the primary means of self-expression. Hipsters do not generate new cultural forms, but instead retool old countercultural symbols and tropes. In the New York Times article “What Was the Hipster,” Mark Grief evaluates the hipster’s creative expression:

“One could say, exaggerating only slightly, that the hipster moment did not produce artists, but tattoo artists, who gained an entire generation’s arms, sternums, napes, ankles, and lower backs as their canvas. It did not produce photographers, but snapshot and party photographers: Last Night’s Party, Terry Richardson, the Cobra Snake. It did not produce painters, but graphic designers. It did not yield a great literature, but it made good use of fonts. And hipsterism did not make an avant-garde; it made communities of early adopters.”

The hipster’s creative skill set, much like his or her consumption habits, was cultivated to demonstrate taste and reinforce identity. Critic Douglas Haddow echoes Grief’s sentiment: “An amalgamation of its own history, the youth of the West are left with consuming cool rather than creating it.”⁷

The anti-capitalist facet of the hipster identity is epitomized by the chestnuts “you’ve probably never heard of it” or “I liked _____ before it was cool”: phrases used ad infinitum to mock the hipster search for the obscure. These punch lines observe a trend in which hipsters “continuously plumb the recent past for things not yet incorporated into the marketing machine.”⁸ The selectivity of hipster consumerism favors

independently or alternatively produced goods, with a slant against the mass-produced, heavily-marketed, and poorly crafted. In *The Hipster Handbook*, author Robert Lanham notes: “Hipsters possess an innate contempt for franchises, strip malls, and the corporate world in general... Hipsters listen solely to bands produced by independent labels and steer clear of major labels such as *Island and Capitol*.”⁹

Music selection is an exemplar of the hipster partiality toward local and independent producers. Hipster music taste encompasses a broad range of genres, but personal music selection within these genres is dictated as much by the sound of an artist as by an artist’s perceived authenticity. Local and independent music, as well as music from decades past can offer the consumer a raw sound inaccessible through the music of dominant culture. Author R. Jay Magill, Jr. explains the appeal of ‘stripped down and honest’ music: “Their fans desire albums that are not overproduced or fed through the market-demographic algorithms at BMG or Sony to find out first what sells before they are made.”¹⁰ Hipsters make a clear effort to avoid music that has been marketed by large companies, opting instead for the unrefined image of the unknown artist.

Beyond spending habits, the pattern of anti-corporatism dictates the hipster employment philosophy. This philosophy is exemplified by a sentence from *The Hipster Handbook*: “Ideally, the Hipster is able to avoid work altogether.”¹¹ Choice unemployment, accepting financial support from family members, full-time studentship, blogging, and ‘working in media’ or other creative careers are commonly associated with the hipster lifestyle. Part-time and temporary work, such as working for a coffee shop, record store, bike courier service, or local bar, are also popular choices for the hipster type for the reason that it allows him or her to escape regular work hours, corporate attire, and normal levels of commitment.

Upper Class Affiliation/Marginalized Group Affiliation

Membership in the middle to upper class is implicit within the hipster identity. The conspicuous display of stylistic deviance necessitated to create this image requires both time and money. A person who lacks these resources is resultantly excluded. Persons with greater amounts of time and money are more suitable for the hipster lifestyle because their lack of monetary restrictions allows them a greater range of products to

choose from and their lack of time restrictions allows them to perform the search with a greater breadth. Furthermore, some authors suggest individuals with a college education and relative wealth have greater motivation to take on this identity. In his article “Was the Hipster Really All That Bad?” Ben Davis suggests that the slowing of upward mobility and the narrowing prospects for college graduates has led to an acceptance of nontraditional lifestyles and ironic cynicism. In this model, those who can afford higher education are motivated to engage in radical behavior as a result of growing societal permissiveness and disillusionment caused by the expectations and actual realities of life as a college graduate.

Contradictorily, the hipster aesthetic does not reflect a high socio-economic status. The symbols of non-ironic hipster fashion are without exception borrowed from marginalized populations: the blue-collar worker, children, the elderly, “nerds,” “rednecks,” and persons with nonstandard sexual identities. Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, flannel, jean

“...the moustache intones ‘sexual ambiguity, caricaturized ethnic origins, flagrant gayness, or creepily self-aware sexual potency.’”

shorts, Keds, trucker hats, thick-rimmed glasses, grandma sweaters, Parliaments, low-fi cameras, mutton chops, skinny jeans, handlebar moustaches, androgynous haircuts, leotards, rompers, dive bars, and keffiyah scarves are material items whose use was historically limited to a distinct group of consumers and have now come to be characteristic

symbols of the hipster identity. The metamessages in Magill’s semiotic analysis of hipster style reflect a trend of affiliation with marginalized groups: the trucker hat imparts “a strong, don’t-take-no-shit attitude to the blue-collar guys with whom it originates;”¹² youthful sneakers “exhibit a self-styled young-at-heartness;”¹³ and the moustache intones “sexual ambiguity, caricaturized ethnic origins, flagrant gayness, or creepily self-aware sexual potency.”¹⁴

Cultural commentators suggest that the trend of adopting symbols of another class or minority is motivated by the aspiration to rebel against their own class or to achieve coolness only attainable through the gritty realism of these groups. Magill asserts that hipsters have tried

to distance themselves from the upper classes in order to avoid “an ultimately Christian-inspired existence of banalities and pressed Docker slacks and pained smiles that Nietzsche once called ‘a slow suicide: a petty bore, durable life; gradually quite ordinary, bourgeois, mediocre.’”¹⁵ Much like the hipster’s use of irony, this theory depends on the premise that hipsters recognize a fault in accepted existence of their peers. Author Rob Walker argues that the source of motivation is not as noble as others would make it seem. He claims that new bohemianism attempts at an unpretentious image while disguising its true intentions: “exclusivity and elegance aren’t cool, but exclusivity dressed up in the artfully tattered guise of the downscale and democratic / that’s the coolest thing of all.”¹⁶

Dependence on Kitsch/Search for the Esoteric

The hipster material culture can be divided into two categories: tacky, mass marketed kitsch goods and obscure or idiosyncratic cultural goods. These two types of goods are consciously juxtaposed, but their functions within creating a complex and collaged personal style are dissimilar. Kitsch goods are bought and displayed with a clear self-consciousness that expresses the owner’s ironic or nostalgic motives for purchase. An ironically displayed item functions as cultural commentary, evoking viewer awareness of the item’s absurd existence. Take, for instance, a basic black t-shirt screen printed with the image of three wolves and a moon. Although wearing this item with sincerity is traditionally an action restricted to children and wolf enthusiasts, in 2009 a version of this the wolf t-shirt became a top seller on Amazon. The Washington Post identified the source of shirt’s popularity as “Internet hipsters,” who gave the shirt over 1,000 five star reviews. An interviewee in the article described the phenomenon as a “case where the shirt is so uncool that it’s cool.”¹⁷ The element of cool in the wolf t-shirt – and all ironic goods – comes from the blatantly disingenuous advertisement that causes others to wonder about the realities of the item’s existence and reflexively remarks on the owner’s ability to discriminate between items of good taste and items of bad taste. In his book *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, Magill suggests an explanation of the motivations for ironic behavior:

“[An ironist] sees the major thrust of mainstream culture as an embarrassing problem for his national identity because it perpetuates illusions, faux moral authority, obvious “moral lessons,” and bad taste. Reactionary distancing – aestheticizing, ironizing – helps ironists to view these places, items, and products as something not a part of themselves. They are strangers in a strange land. They view them ironically or anthropologically, askew or from above, in either case, from internally afar.”¹⁸

Ironizing permits that hipster to assert his own distaste for the clichés and spectacles of popular culture while retaining what David Foster Wallace calls an “existential poker-face.”¹⁹ This disaffection presents as “coolness,” traceable back to historically “cool” cultural figures such as James Dean and Fonzie.²⁰ Commentator Christy Wampole cites two causes for the hipster’s adoption of an ironic lifestyle. The first is the belief that our society has exhausted its ability to produce new culture. She argues that ironic living “works as a pre-emptive surrender and takes the form of reaction rather than action.”²¹ The second cause she cites is the Internet, which allows greater media consumption and a reprioritization of the importance of virtual life over reality. Individuals who consciously try to distance themselves with a nonconformist lifestyle find themselves unable to avoid popular culture. Hipster irony offers an outlet for expression of this frustration. However, the practice of irony implies an apparent ethos of superiority, whether intentional or not.

“...‘a sincere remembrance of things past, however commodified or cheesy or kitschy or campy or embarrassing, remains real and small and beautiful...’”

The nostalgic function of kitsch purchase stems from sincere appreciation of low cultural goods. Hipsters preserve childhood items as well as goods referred to as “vintage,” from an era that predated their birth. Preference is given towards unusual old items, ones with an obvious personal history such as those found in thrift stores or at flea markets. Magill suggests that this trend is motivated by the desire to save items

that have lost their practical use: “a sincere remembrance of things past, however commodified or cheesy or kitschy or campy or embarrassing, remains real and small and beautiful because otherwise these old things are about to be discarded by a culture that bulldozes content once it has exhausted its economic utility.”²² Robert Lanham also sustains that nostalgia is a factor in kitsch purchasing, but adds that this trend may also be a “celebration of low culture they’ve been instructed to avoid.”²³

In conflict with the glorification of low culture is hipster culture’s fascination with and compulsion to seek out the obscure. Since material culture is used as the basis of identity, hipsters seek out items that bolster not only a nonconformist image, but a nonconformist image that is unique to that individual. Writer Mark Grief characterizes the hipster as a ‘rebel consumer,’ someone who “adopting the rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture, convinces himself that buying the right mass products individualizes him as transgressive.” The “right products” in this case are fashions and goods from previous fringe movements as well as modern esoteria. In terms of fringe movements from which to appropriate, the hipster is indiscriminant, drawing from a multitude of sources items that align with one’s personal philosophy. Influences from Beat, punk, vegan, anarchist, hippie, and grunge cultures amalgamate to express what Davis calls a “romance with neo-bohemia, neo-collectivism, neo-tribalism.”²⁴

Obscure modern items range from arcane art or film to outrageous fashions to politically incorrect media. The common thread between contemporary goods purchased by a hipster is that they are difficult to appreciate. The appeal in this circumstance is that since few people will find value in this item, it retains potency as an extension of the individual. However, once this item is introduced into popular culture, its appeal is lost. Haddow observes this trend: “Less a subculture, the hipster is a consumer group – using their capital to purchase empty authenticity and rebellion. But the moment a trend, band, sound, style or feeling gains too much exposure, it is suddenly looked upon with disdain.”²⁵ From this pattern comes the trope of liking something “before it was cool.” The popular meaning of this phrase is not exclusively referential to apriorism, but also connotes a justification for the loss of value in an item. Based on the assumption that funding and a larger fan base alter a cultural producer’s authenticity, hipsters are caught in a cycle of

approval and abandonment.

DISCUSSION

Importance of Hipsters to Subculture

The existence of these apparent ideological contradictions in the hipster identity reveals a deviation from the traditional conceptualization of subculture in that subculturalists have a greater tolerance for inauthenticity and unoriginality. Clearly, the hipster identity does not exert a totalizing influence over the behavior of the subculturalist. Relaxed adherence to revolutionary ideals such as anti-capitalism and naturalism seem to imply a widespread lack of commitment to radical value set. Collaging of styles from the past and present, despite their previous

“Rather than the norm of the working-class rebel, hipsters come from a wealthy background and paradoxically use their privilege in order to deny their privilege.”

associations, seems to imply lack of concern with creating a cohesive image. Mandy Kahn argues that the trend of bricolage may have been a conscious consideration: “And after a century of re-invention, perhaps nothing seemed more revolutionary than borrowing, using, valu-

ing – than crediting the past, even worshipping it – and in doing so, throwing off the hampering need to invent.”²⁶ Regardless of motivation, sampling from the recent past demonstrates a divergent way of constructing the radical identity. Taste expresses personal politics, and style acts as an extension of (or even substitution for) social rebellion.

Another trend indicated by these dichotomies is that a tolerance by subculturalists is a fragmented group identity. Not only do hipsters lack coherence within their own presentation, but their presentation as a group is also highly diverse. As Haddow explains: “Now, one mutating, trans-Atlantic melting pot of styles, tastes and behavior has come to define the generally indefinable idea of the ‘Hipster.’”²⁷ Variance between individual hipsters can be attributed to the common ideal shared among hipsters of individuality. In addition to their natural lack of stylistic and ideological consistency, hipsters adamantly resist their affiliation to a larger subculture. Hipsters have been an enduring part of American cul-

ture for over a decade, yet their membership is almost entirely involuntary. Muggleton hypothesizes that subculturalists “resist interpellation into named subcultural identities precisely because it invokes a homogenous, stable and uniform notion of subculture that conflicts with the lived reality of their own experiences.”²⁸ The broad trends that unite the members of the hipster subculture tend to involve a concern with self-presentation, suggesting that hipsterdom manifests more as a lifestyle or personal aesthetic rather than a subculture.

A third implication of the hipster to the understanding of subculture is the limitation of accessibility or privileging of subcultural identity. Subcultures of the past have often prided themselves on their democratic ideals, their willingness to accept persons who thought and dressed like themselves. In hipster subculture, affluence fosters boundary and identity maintenance. Rather than the norm of the working-class rebel, hipsters come from a wealthy background and paradoxically use their privilege in order to deny their privilege. Through stylistic self-deprecation, hipsters straddle socio-economic lines, but never fully engage with the frustrations of the blue collar laborer.

Importance of Hipsters to Culture

The presence of hipster culture seems to suggest an inversion between the values of dominant culture and the values of counterculture. Around the same time as the inception of hipster culture, critics such as Thomas Frank began noticing that mainstream culture had begun to resemble the radical sensibility: “Advertising teaches us not in the ways of puritanical self-denial (a bizarre notion on the face of it), but in orgiastic, never-ending self-fulfillment. It counsels not rigid adherence to the tastes of the herd but vigilant and constantly updated individualism.”²⁹ Corporate brands began co-opting the music and poetry of previous countercultures, independent and unconventional businessmen were celebrated as cultural rebels, and “The New Individualist” began to replace “The Organization Man.”³⁰ Value exchange occurred in the opposite direction as well; counterculture started to adopt the ideals of the dominant class, particularly the upper class. In hipster culture this appears as the fixation with the authentic. While hipsters were not pursuing pure bred dogs or original Mondrian paintings, the philosophy underlying hipster consumption is the same. Though the products are different, hipsters too

seek purity in what they buy.

Additionally, reactions to the presence of the hipster identity reflect the intolerance of cultural commentators for deviations from laws of authenticity. As previously mentioned, the majority of the literature uncovered about the hipster subculture, including the literature used in this paper, exuded a negative slant. With article titles such as “Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization,” “Why the hipster must die: A modest proposal to save the New York cool,” and “How to Live Without Irony,” these critiques universally emphasize a disapproval for subcultural contradictions. It would seem that outsiders have a higher standard for hipster authenticity than the persons performing this identity.

Ultimately, the hipster is important because it represents new understanding of subculture. It signals a diverge from the heroic model of the working class subculture, toward one that seems to resemble patterns of dominant society as well as expressing a genuine appreciation for the cultural capital it produces. Hipster radicalism is juxtaposed with its self-consciousness, its hatred of popular culture with its unavoidable dependence on popular culture, and its obsessive consumption with its passion for the independent. The contradictions of hipster subculture are all too apparent. However, one must consider that the hipster could be a representation of the broader society in which it exists.

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