We Love to Hate You: Discourse Between the Distance Running Subculture and Mainstream Media

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The purpose of this paper is to examine how subcultures that value exclusivity navigate the tensions inherent in mainstream popularity. Through an analysis of the distance running subculture, we show that runners use mainstream media as a tool to demonstrate their exclusivity. They do this by using mainstream media portrayals of running as a tool to assert their insider knowledge of the subculture, to differentiate themselves from others by showing their unique appreciation of running media, and by justifying the mainstream popularity of the sport by proclaiming that it supports them in their more exclusive running lifestyle.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Subculture researchers have tirelessly sought to understand the relationship between subcultures and mainstream society. Within this work, some research posits a positive relationship while other research presents a negative relationship. The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between subcultures and mainstream society and presents a conceptualization of this relationship as symbiotic in nature.

Consumer research is one of many fields that embrace subculture research with many researchers examining a variety of subcultures, including but not limited to, Harley Davidson riders (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), sky-divers (Celsi et al. 1993), extreme sport participants (Quester, Beverland, and Farrelly 2006), the Australian hip-hop community (Arthur 2006), tattooists (Bengtsson, Ostberg, and Kjeldgaard 2005), and X-Files and Star Trek fans (Kozinets 1997, 2001).

While each of these studies offer different theoretical insights into the nature of subcultures, they all converge on the notion that subcultures and subcultures of consumption are characterized as thriving on a sense of exclusivity (e.g. Arthur 2006; Donnelly and Young 1988; Hebdige 1979; Quester et al. 2006; Richardson 2006; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and are opposed to appropriation into the mainstream culture: with ‘going mainstream’ viewed as detrimental to the subculture as a whole (e.g. Fox 1987; Irwin 1973; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

On the other hand, some elements of going mainstream are beneficial to subcultures. For example, media can serve an informative role in which it differentiates the subculture from the dominant culture, articulates possible behaviors of members, and works to expand the subculture by reaching new members (Celsi et al. 1993; Donnelly and Young 1988; Irwin 1973; Kozinets 2001; Wheaton 2000). Thus, the overall nature of the interaction between media and subcultures is ambiguous and begs the question: how do subcultures that value exclusivity navigate the tensions inherent in mainstream popularity?

To explore the relationship between subcultures and mainstream media, we conducted a detailed analysis of the distance running subculture. The distance running subculture was selected because it is a well-defined subculture with a clear and distinct culture that is also experiencing mainstream popularity. We use a combination of semi-structured depth interviews (McCracken 1989) and online message board observation (Kozinets 2002; Muniz and Schau 2005). Purposive sampling and snowballing techniques were used to recruit informants from the local running community, university running associations, and personal contacts.

Interviews were conducted with 41 self-identified distance runners (19 female, 22 male) with varying levels of involvement with running. The majority of the runners interviewed were recreational runners; however, interviews were also conducted with some key community leaders and elite runners. To balance the perspectives of the recreational runners, we conducted an analysis of an online message board catering to more serious runners. Using naturalistic observation techniques, we used the interview findings to guide our selection of threads to observe, seeking out avenues for both confirmation and disconfirmation of emerging themes. Interviews and online observations were transcribed and then coded, first using free coding and then using QSR NVivo 1.2 and standard data analysis and interpretation procedures (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Thompson 1997). Important themes and tensions were uncovered through across informant and within individual informant analyses.

Analysis of the data revealed two primary themes: (1) a tension within the subculture remaining an exclusive entity, grounded in the core values of achieving emancipation through the pursuit of modernist elements of achievement, competition, and measurement of time and distance (Chalmers 2006), and the adoption of a more inclusive attitude that encourages mass participation and (2) subculture members using mainstream media and popularity as a tool to assert their exclusivity.

The first finding of this study is subculture members simultaneously supporting subcultural exclusivity and being inclusive. Runners supporting exclusivity is manifested in four ways within the distance running subculture: (1) explicit references to being part of an exclusive group, (2) a desire to see running glorified in the eyes of the mainstream public, (3) an emphasis on supporting elite athletes who epitomize the athleticism of running and (4) a disdain for mainstream media undermining the sport’s competitiveness. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on inclusivity and mainstream popularity. This is evidenced in three ways. First, runners enjoy seeing the running mentality applied to areas outside of running by mainstream media. Second, runners express a desire for more television and advertising coverage of recreational runners. Third, runners express a sense of evangelism and encourage mass participation in the sport.

The second theme in this study outlines how members of the running subculture manage the tension between exclusivity and inclusivity. The data from this study reveals that runners use mainstream media and the popularity of the running activity to assert their exclusivity. There are three ways in which this is done. First, runners use mainstream media portrayals of running to show their insider knowledge of the subculture. Second, runners differentiate themselves by showing that they are unique in their appreciation of running media. Third, runners justify the mainstream popularity of the sport by proclaiming that it supports them in their exclusive running lifestyle.

This study serves to enhance current conceptualizations of subcultures by illuminating a previously overlooked type of interaction with the mainstream culture. The findings of this study are particularly important for consumer researchers. First, they show how subculture members react to and use advertisements and other media to enhance their own agendas. This represents an interesting type of co-production of meanings that blurs the boundaries between what is included and excluded in a subculture. Second, the tension inherent within a subculture highlights the sometimes overlooked variation and complexity of subcultures. Subcultures are generally conceptualized as being fairly homogenous within their bounds, and while these findings do support the notion that a subculture has a core set of values, a tremendous amount of variation exists as to how these core values manifest themselves. Finally, these findings show the important role that media can play in maintaining subcultures, especially those that operate as mundane, yet salient, consumption activities.
REFERENCES


