Revisiting the Subculture: Fragmentation of the Social and the Venue For Contemporary Consumption

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The cultural impulse for fragmentation and the change to presentational forms of resistance through the means of music are found to be key forces in the growth and multiplication of subcultures through which consumers increasingly participate in life and organize their consumption activities and preferences in and through these subcultures.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although, subcultures have traditionally been defined mostly on the bases of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and class distinctions and thus people have been categorized and compressed into given, stable and clearly demarcated categories based on traditional and modern lineages, with the cultural turn from the modern to the postmodern, it is observed that people have the potential and vision for generating their own categories and, therefore, do not need to obey or try to fit in these predetermined, static categories with boundaries. People have begun to construct and structure cultural identities more often on the basis of their personal choices. The very idea of stable, coherent subcultures as distinct entities with recognizable boundaries has thus been challenged. Instead the focus is on the fluid, heterogeneous, taste-based, fragmented, and transitory nature of so-called postmodern subcultures.

Thus, subcultures have come to provide a venue for people to find anchors and feel empowered to generate more dynamic, fluid and organic identities and modes of life. Subcultures have also grown to be venues for consumers to not only perform their personal lifestyle choices, but to also respond to an alienating and objectifying individualism by constructing collective identities using activities, including music, style, and ideology. On the one hand, subculture is perceived as a meaningful alternative to a dominant culture, therefore, not a direct challenge to the dominant institutions in our lives. On the other hand, alternative lifestyle practices and creating venues for expression for alternative ways of being can also be considered to be a resistance to the dominant system of meanings and values.

When humanity lost faith in the emancipation potential of science and the progress of modernity, the grand narratives of modernity have waned and the social is fragmented. No longer the grand narratives of modernity but multiple, fragmented narratives that we observe in subcultures tend to be employed to practice fragmentation and dispersion. Postmodern subculture identities are multiple and fluid. They are constituted through consumption and the new sources of identity, as well as the new signifiers of difference. Consumers do not have to worry about contradictions among their selected subcultural identities for there are only ephemeral attachments to a variety of styles.

In the fragmentation process, one form or style does not dominate over or eliminate all others. Instead, different styles work as a catalyst for fragmentation, in which consumers are willing to experience and sample the different styles and cultural artifacts. A postmodernist sensibility recognizes the fact that various subculture groups will have preferences for different and multiple ways of being and living rather than clinging to or claiming the superiority of just one. Therefore, fragmentation gains strength in postmodernism by having tolerance for differences and multiplicity; without any judgmental assessment in terms of superiority and inferiority. However, in order for these fragmented life modes to work, community is required since consumers can only achieve meaning and existence through participation in or construction of communities, thus enabling experiences of varied (sub)cultures, styles, and modes of being. In sum, contemporary subcultures are the consequence of the fragmentation of society and the means for producing the meaningful experiences that are sought in life, as well as for producing selves or self images within these experiences. Human beings transform from relatively passive consumers into active producers in the venues of subcultures whereby they are empowered.

Music is a core element or artifact of subcultural phenomena that is set apart from other arts and activities due to its transcendent popularity over the others and its highly permeated position in everyday life. Music is proposed as a producer of people and experiences rather than simply a reflection. Subcultural identities are created and developed through active participation in the production and consumption of music. Music works as a means of facilitating the entry of a subculture as well as diffusing it. Music provides this resource for subcultures because not only can members utilize it easily but also because it has a culturally integrative potential to integrate individuals with the group. Music and live performances, as a form of cultural expression and cultural artifact, play a key role in generating subcultural identity and collective experience.

The forms of resistance have transformed in step with the epochal changes in human history. Rebellion was the dominant form of resistance in traditional culture where forces beyond humanity were believed to control human destiny. With modernity, confrontation became the dominant form of resistance in which discontent could be confronted with the goal of changing the world. However, with the waning of modernity, presentation is substituting confrontation as the dominant form of resistance. There are no claims of fundamentals, but the universe we encounter is seen as what has been culturally constructed, providing people greater license to present possible and potential modes of living and being in the world. In sum, subcultures present core meanings of resistance, but then offer venue for individuals to customize their subcultural identity. Subcultures are consumers’ own sites of being by resisting imposed meanings while producing their own. Self-creativity through resistance, mixing styles, music, and ideologies, which offer aesthetic avenues and thereby greater texture for immersing into and experiencing life becomes the preferred presentational mode.

We have attempted to explain the reasons for the growth and multiplication, through fragmentation, of subcultures as the sites of much future consumption. We identified two key forces in the development and growth of subcultures: The cultural impulse for fragmentation and the change to presentational forms of resistance; two forces that impel each other. We have also identified the means most conducive to helping the trend toward fragmentation and presentation: Music. Consequently, what we find is a continual multiplication of subcultures, as different members of an initial subculture find purpose in presenting a different, even if in nuance, mode of organizing and experiencing life to produce meaningful and substantive moments.