Today’s youth subcultures: Resistance or corporation

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Abstract

The most common narrative about subcultures is that they are dissenting from mainstream politics, religion, social norms, traditions and mass media. From this point of view, it is possible to signify that 60s youth subcultures have aimed to form their unique identities with opposing the pressure of conformity, banality of mass culture and standardization. In parallel with the transformation of culture during 80s and 90s, the form of the youth subcultures have also changed. In last twenty years, many studies on youth, particularly under the name of the post-subcultural theory, provide a critical perspective by offering concepts such as ‘neo-tribes’, ‘lifestyle’ and ‘scene’ instead of subculture to reveal the changing structure of youth subcultures. Today, subcultures make a significant contribution on aspects of multicultural structure. Nevertheless, they are unable to make sense beyond popular culture. In other words, through media youth subcultures ironically become a part of the system, which they were opposed to. On that note, this study will examine the transformation of youth subcultures through a couple of recent cases.

Keywords: Subculture, Youth, Popular Culture, Lifestyle, Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Evolution of Youth Subcultures

The root of youth subcultures can be traced back to Afro-Caribbean immigrants in England during 1950s and ‘teddy boys’ emerging from the proletarian class. In 1960s, on the other hand, another youth subculture rejecting ownership, work life and traditional clothing style and called ‘beats’ emerged in America. The advancement and success of the ‘beat’ movement is a visible sign of a fundamental social change that has started to occur a long time ago and is perceived in various types basically. At this point, Storey (2000) has pointed out to a fundamental change experienced in the consumption structure: “There was wealth sufficient for working people to consume based on their wishes rather than their needs during this period for the first time: Moreover, the working class, who used consumption patterns, started to express their own identity during this period.”

This culture has started to become visible since the second half of 1960s and in addition to reminding of the bohemian culture that emerged after the First World War, it evokes the previously experienced avant-garde high culture in terms of the components including comfortable clothing, free and easy attitude, rejection of conventional art styles and other high culture products like in Dada example, drug use, quoting black culture and public culture and defending radical values. However, popularization of these high culture styles in lower admiration cultures, the extent of its public and the variation contained by the cultural array that it supports is novel.

The common ground of the youth subcultures of this period was that they opposed the various aspects of the existing society, especially war tendency, economic inequality within the society, the distinction between generations and hypocrisy created by a visible gap between the policies implemented on social values. These youngsters deal with social problems rather than individuality and react to the fact that they are torn in between (Gans and Incirlioglu 2007). Hence, it is possible to remark that the youth cultures of 1960s emerged in the context of ‘counter cultures’ and were shaped in the framework of this equality.

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During 1960s when the youth subcultures emerged, Wicke (2006) emphasized that the youth, unlike the old generations, should not be hasty about growing up fast and benefiting from the opportunities of the adults as soon as possible in regard to the fundamental social change, and stated that the change aided the consumption industry basically (Wicke 2006). Therefore, it is wise to invest on this field. Shaping the purchasing habits of the youth during this period will also illustrate its influence in the future absolutely. Market strategists invest and break into market on the fashion, cosmetics, recreation, media and media-related music fields for deriving a profit. Discovery of the youth’s own needs and consumption habits has led “rock ’n roll” to transform to a musical and cultural movement responding to artistic and socio-political expectations and to be turned into a novel shape for everyone to listen to it over time by creating ‘clear and harmless’ alternative symbols (Wicke 2006).

In 1970s, timbre gained independence by disintegrating from conservative relationships of music made by focusing on personal expression and turned into a material to be processed based on its own sensual value. Hence, philosophy of musical production moved to ‘how it is made rather than what is made’. Music became the quality of an experience based on corporeality, sensuality and imagination. The target is to control culture that is gradually moved to an interest-driven direction by creativity and to have a voice again for defining the content of cultural process. Especially, the characteristics of rock music are formed with the collaboration of the persons who make this music and their fans and these characteristics make up the essence of rock experience. Moreover, the youth has gathered in an endless feast owing to culture, music and politics and dropped the mask of ‘consumption’ and declared war against the system in a large battle-front. In this context, rock has kept its characteristic to be a hope justifying the persons who want to change the world (Wicke 2006).

The group order of the subculture youth of this period attempts to keep the traditional opinions of working class together and at the same time, tries to benefit from the opportunities and means presented by a wealthy society with a symbolic reaction to the collapse of the traditional culture of working class. For instance, despite the jobs where ‘modes’ work is generally low wage jobs promising a low career, an attempt to be visible can be observed in the image and style of a ‘mode’. This visibility appears as an imaginative connection to the existent conditions of the class positioned in the upper section of social structure. Similarly, the music the wealthy consumers listen to and their clothing styles reflect their hedonist image although they share many traditional values of the parent culture including their speech style or rituals. Hence, their reconciliatory attitude against this paradox gives a clue about the structure of subcultures as well.

Subcultures create meaningful identities by means of their consumption rituals. Studies have been conducted to define the suitability of the goods that are prepared by the current market for the persons who select them and to define the differences between these groups. Hall and Jefferson assessed this process in their book titled ‘Resistance through Rituals’ (Clarke 1993): “During this process, there are group members harmonizing with certain objects and these objects may resemble to focused interest areas, activities, group structure and collective image objects that reflect fundamental values of group members.” The most significant of these objects is music. Listening to subcultural music is perhaps the most active music consumption type. Music consumption is one of the tools for a subculture to separate itself from other society members and develop an identity and renew itself culturally. This is not a rejection process carried out to recognize economic and cultural power of music industry and it is an allegation that pop music field is full of dilemma like all commercial popular culture fields. As Chambers (1985) asserted: “Only after the commercial power of cassette companies was recognized, convincing attraction of radio was accepted and music medias suggestions were started to be observed, a population has emerged purchasing cassettes, dancing to music rhythm and living to music beats that show the great potential of pop.”

Being a part of a youth subculture expresses especially a certain music taste and a common creation act around this music consumption. According to Riesman (1950), creation of a group sensation by music is crucial rather than a group being real or imaginative. This group is formed by a consumption act and an imaginative connection has been generated among them in the context of consumed music even if there is no one present as the listener listening to music (Riesman 1950). As Hebdige (2004) described the gloomy and economically problematic atmosphere of 1970s, he discussed how ‘punk’ movement emerged by means of a grasping eclecticism that synthesizes different yet innovative trends. Punk music contains rebellion distinctly and this sabotages
the audience supervision efforts of music industry. Punk opposes commerce basically (Gottdiener 2005). This movement is prominent among the youth subcultures organized around music and despite it is characterized as more meaningful than commercial pop music as a manifestation of a rebellion, according to Hebdige (2004), these youngsters’ communication occurs by means of consumption movements ultimately (Blair 1993).

Furthermore, Hebdige (2004) makes a reference to the concept ‘bricolage’ in order to portray vividly how this novel music influenced clothing style of people eclectically and how this in turn aided in the transformation of punk attitude to a completely configured subculture. Bricolage points to the creative processes equipped with subcultural purposes that oppose to the basic functions of media and cultural products. Subcultures took trading implications to use for their own purposes and meanings during bricolage process. Products are integrated or transformed in a form not desired by the producer and commercial goods are re-approached to produce opposite meanings. For instance, when punks use dog collars as an accessory, they achieve the said gain. When homogeneity and bricolage are considered together, they characterize the resistance power of subcultures, which form a collective opposition to the things having all conformist and commercial rights and copyright, against the coverage by the ‘mainstream’ media and other dominant social powers (Laughey 2010). Subculture youth establishes the symbolic form of contention against both the hegemon culture and parent culture this way and by means of certain behavior patterns, speech styles, music taste, etc. Based on this model, subculture youth always returns to ideological harmlessness with commercial partnership from originality and opposition because culture industry ultimately manages to market subcultural insurgency for consumption and profit purposes. As Hebdige (2004) discussed, ‘cultural styles of the youth can start by putting up a symbolic fight however these conclude by establishing new values and styles, new products and industries or reviving the former ones.’

**Post Subcultural Theory and Its Key Concepts**

Despite the deterministic influence of Hebdige (2004) and CCCS on subculture studies, especially the studies conducted in England during the recent years have shaped a sociology convention attempting to demarcate from CCCS approaches. These novel approaches, shaped by a series of concepts including ‘post-subculture’ (Muggleton 2002), ‘post-culture’ (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2007), ‘beyond subculture’ (Huq 2007), started to address the subculture concept especially at a level that is generally ignored by CCCS.

The studies of social theoreticians such as Max Weber, Jean Baudrillard and Michel Maffesoli should be scrutinized critically in order to better understand the progress of post subcultural theory. Postmodernists base the discussion-ground against ‘theoretical orthodoxy’ of CCCS on these theoreticians and starting from this point of view, instead of subculture concept, they produce new terms including ‘neo-tribe’, ‘lifestyle’ and ‘scene’. Reluctance of postmodernism about focusing on social structure leads to a personal social grasp (Blackman 2005). Post-cultural thought, in addition to establishing a basis for different anthologies, produces numerous novel analytical tools and conceptual approaches and forms a significant critical approach for many studies conducted on the youth during the past ten years especially. Post-subcultural theory also plays a major role for understanding the function of culture industry to shape the identities and lifestyles of the youth (Bennett 2011).

The emphasis made to subcultural difference is one of the major criticisms of post-subculture theoreticians about Hebdige (2004) and CCCS; hence a critical perspective started to be shaped claiming that CCCS researchers ignore the routine sights of daily life this way. For instance, according to Clarke (1993), since Hebdige (2004) and other CCCS researchers focus on extraordinary sights of subcultures especially in the context of symbols, styles and signs, they actually turn their back to daily life. Whilst Hebdige (2004) upholds that cultures and subcultures should defend themselves against the rough attacks of mass culture, Clarke (1993) suggests that styles of mass culture are intertwined rather than having an antagonist relationship (Gelder 2007).

Angela McRobbie emphasized that despite a line is drawn between pop culture and youth culture in CCCS’s studies on subcultures, and youth culture is described as a form of a symbolic class reality, and pop culture is considered as a sign of consumption culture, in reality, these two cultures have integrated by a relationship always progressing (Storey 2000).

Muggleton (2002), on the other hand, thinks that despite subcultural styles that intersect with postmodernist thoughts generally are unstable and multipartite, he thinks that they consist of individual identities within
groups containing people from various classes. In other words, postmodernism contributes to the formation of subcultural identities which are less partial and less collective (Laughey 2006).

**The Role of Consumption and Pleasure-Oriented and Media-Based Youth Subcultures and the Production of ‘Hegemonic Superstructure’**

Consumption ideology seems like one of the alternative substitution strategies. This ideology makes us think that it will solve all of our problems, make us achieve a re-integration situation and return to the happy world of an imaginative field. However, this does not mean that there is no mutual relationship between the subculture youth styles and conformist fashion trends (Storey 2000). According to Willis et al. (1990), consumption is a symbolic movement of creativity. The parallelism between the mainstay of this determination and the originalities of subcultures is the most crucial component approximating the consumption phenomenon and today’s subcultures.

The ‘consumption subculture’ concept produced in this context was used first by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) to define various subcultures interconnected based on a certain product, brand or consumption activity in the society. Such type of subcultures can emerge around music, television shows, movies or brands. The groups called ‘brand groups’, have the highest level of consumer-commitment.

The members of these subcultures which are formed as media-based generally (for instance, subcultures formed by the fans of Star Trek, X-Files shows) communicate with each other again by means of media (by discussion forums in Internet). Virtual platform makes us think that such type of groups provide a higher level of interaction opportunity to their members in comparison to the real one.

According to Gottdiener (2005), mass culture industries are based on a cultural creation produced by the experiences of users about new inspirations and products. Subcultures respond to ideologies opposing or conciliating mass culture. Use value, interchange value and indication value cycles are intertwined with the relationship between mass-culture industries, some of which could exist in other societies, and subcultures.

We find three separate processes for the transformation of youth subcultures to popular culture within the dominant cultural structures by means of media with the aid of Hebdige (2004). During the first transformation stage, subcultures are accused of threatening the middle class existence and ‘marginalized’, ‘humiliated’ and ‘stigmatized’ by means of media. During this process, media announce subcultures as threats directed to the stability and ethical (or physical) health of society and define them as ‘unsocial deviant groups’. The most distinct method used by media is ‘acting as an ethics guard’ while it includes the cultures other than the dominant culture within the mainstream. This becomes prominent especially when it considers the deviant or antisocial acts (blasphemy, fighting, animal-like behavior and brutality) of subculture groups and shows these deviations to the society (Konyar 2008). For example, Sex Pistols group members cursed constantly in a live show in 1976 and caused a serious ethical panic fueled by English tabloids (Laughey 2010).

The main function of media is to reproduce the major definitions created by the dominant culture. More clearly, organizations including police, who is defined as the sovereign group, communication tools and judicial bodies determine and redefine the improper actions during the redefinition of the actions that were defined as deviant. Thus, it turns into a cycle (Konyar 2011).

In conclusion, media have a fire-fueling function at this stage. The response given by subculture youth who is shown as a target by media is to resort to more deviant acts generally and emphasize their deviant image and labels even more clearly. This time the situation gets worse and more vindictive and harsh sayings take place by means of media. Media play the most crucial role for both strengthening and posting these labels (Laughey 2010).

The most distinctive subcultural reflex of the youth about the reactions reiterated and popularized by media can be explained by ‘cool attitude’ concept. Being cool is an expression of personal opposition rather than a ‘collective political’ reaction. This opposition hides itself behind an ironic negligence in place of prioritizing itself by clarion slogans. Cool desires to eliminate traditions, customs, social ethical rules and family connections of the society because these demanding and intervening connections do not leave an adequate empty space for the individuals to discover themselves. Cool is hedonist yet this hedonism arrives to the point of self-destruction frequently. In conclusion, cool personality is an expression of the combination of three main personality characteristics: ‘Narcissism, ironic negligence and hedonism’ (Pountain and Robbins 2002). The second stage following
'marginalization' and 'labeling' for transformation of subcultures by means of media is defined as 'naturalization' and 'taming' of subcultures. At this stage, differences disappear. Mental activities of individuals can be distinguished from the material conditions of their existence so easily during this process that this claim surrenders to the phoniness of idealism. Media turn the ‘other’ to an ideological meaning at this point, and in other words they present unsocial types and noisy children and wild animals and stubborn domestic animals and equate the two at the same time or it transforms the ‘other’ to a meaningless exoticness, a plain object, sight and ‘clown’. In the final stage, these clowns are turned into a commodity ready for marketing. In other words, at this stage, mass culture producers start to decide capitalizing the inclinations of subcultures. Styles and meanings produced by subcultures make up the raw material of the production of mass culture industry (Blair 1993). The youth who don’t have to continue the same type of life style in the society by consuming differently can also feel themselves ‘free’ by having an opportunity to lead different life styles since they can consume differently. The characteristic of the cultural structure within this new identity established by the middle class who has a cultural capital is consumption and demanding the different ones constantly. These claimed differences or the ‘other’ cultures are domesticated by culture industries and join the center culture continuously and are set up within a ‘multi-cultural’ identity. Beyond forming a threat in a new dominant cultural setting, the differences gain a meaning at the point of consenting to a hegemonic structure (Konyar 2011). Therefore, different and marginalized cultures start to be included within the center culture gradually. The ‘multicultural’ setting that emerged by this relationship-style determined between the dominant culture and the other culture now also refuses the single-centrist and ethnic-centrist literature, culture, history, religion, music, identity and language discernment (Featherstone 1996).

CONCLUSION

Youth culture is so important commercially that the industry seeking commodities for marketing goes back in time even if it cannot find anything. Since the purpose of cultural production is to provide the greatest consumer mass for advertisers in exchange of the lowest cost, many culture products need to attract many number of consumers possible at the same time. Therefore, music, fashion and other cultures selected from 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are presented again in different forms. Such that today’s youth has an opportunity to experience all of these cultural and artistic trends of the recent past within the same time frame. From this point forth, many more and many varieties of products must be generated and smaller consumer groups must be formed for each content item in the planning regarding subcultures. Today’s subcultures are formed with a structure to aid the individuals to find the content most appropriate to their desires and needs and therefore to satisfy them both aesthetically and in terms of other senses and to improve the relationship of cultures with life.

Adorno’s ‘pseudo-personality’ concept presents a sensible frame for the analysis of youth subcultures. In this context, it is a pseudo-personality expressing an individual, who has turned into a desire object and is beyond phrasing himself/herself as a social and cultural being, as he/she expresses his/her difference only by making a selection from a product range as if offering a massive variety. In other words, according to Adorno, whilst everything that seems spontaneous is in fact planned with a machine-like outright precision, today’s individual can exist in the social arena only by his/her consumer identity.

As the innovative trends created by subcultures are discovered and marketed by mass industries, they are torn from those who show a deep level. At this point, it can be thought that subculture music can reverse this process by rediscovering and re-associating pop music. For instance, if it was possible to go backward from today’s reggae perception to Bob Marley’s reggae perception, Rastafaryan application, which explains all expressional symbols of reggae songs, can be reached. However, despite a significant section of today’s youth can distinguish reggae from today’s pop songs, almost none of them has knowledge about Rastafaryan culture or expressional symbols that are formed as a result of the connection of this culture with reggae songs. Internet is a crucial setting for innovative, marginal and deviant subcultures lacking economic resources and surrounded by political rivalry. However, it must be remembered that Internet can only convey symbolic culture. Moreover, as Internet progresses to become a mass media, it will be only a dream to think that this setting will remain out of the power structures.
Today, punk is considered as a part of pop culture generally. However, nostalgic term on its own cannot explain that punk continues to exist as a popular global subculture. Writer and musician John Robb stated that punk is not merely a musical style and emphasized that this music is also an expression of a critical attitude towards an opponent ideal with a global characteristic. According to him, an 11-year old child listening to Green Day indicates that a door is opened to the opponent culture even if it is superficial (Lynskey 2009). This example can be resembled to opening Pandoras Box and can be interpreted that youth subcultures have currently a significant potential beyond transcending the apparent.

Figure 1. A frame from the comic book titled ‘Persepolis’ written by Marjene Satrapi, turned into a screenplay in 2007 and based on the experiences of a 9-year old girl after Iran Islamic Revolution.

REFERENCES


