



Subcultural escapades via music consumption: Identity transformations and extraordinary experiences in Dionysian music subcultures



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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on subcultures that are shaped by eclectic constellations of style, ideology, and discourse in the context of music perceived to be antithetical to mainstream music and mass culture – what this study refers to as ‘Dionysian music subcultures’. Prior studies recognize the significance of consumption in the construction of subcultural meanings, experiences, and discourses. Consumption of music as a symbolic product with socially constructed meanings that are perceived to be expressive and paradoxical, also through which cultural sources and meanings dynamically circulate, has been so recognized. Yet earlier studies largely overlook the music consumption micro discourses in which consumers ascribe meaning to multifaceted subcultural practices that elicit transformative and extraordinary experiences resulting in identity narratives, identity projects, and shared experiences and meanings based on subcultural practices. To redress this gap, this study introduces the concept of ‘subcultural escapades’ to explicate the nature of the experiences, meanings, and self-identities that are cultivated and transformed within Dionysian music subcultures. Findings of this ethnographic study reveal that subcultural escapades in music consumption are manifest in radical self-expression, therapeutic praxis, and controlled chaos that transform scripted roles, monotonic inertia, and controlled sterility into presentational becoming, cathartic escape, and reinvigorated passion, respectively. Through subcultural escapades, the extraordinary self is realized. Subcultural escapades improve consumer psychological and social well-being as modern illustrations of Nietzsche’s Dionysian conception to transform beyond the self, to the extraordinary self.

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I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves. (Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

1. Introduction

Consumer identities are typically based on the dominant institutions of civil society including nationality, ethnicity, religion, occupation, family, and the like (Bocock, 1993). With the cultural turn from modern to postmodern, consumers have begun to construct and structure cultural identities away from predetermined categories to one based on their personal and collective choices and constructions (Featherstone, 1991; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Jameson, 1991). At the cohort level, reaction to mainstream culture and dominant social order have spawned alternative modes of living based on personal and collective choices and preferences pertaining to their worldviews, lifestyles, musical interests, and ideological orientations (Bennett, 1999; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000; Ulusoy & Fuat Firat, 2011). The emerging and distinct social groups are called ‘subcultures’ through which a growing number of

consumers organize their worldviews, thoughts, ideologies, lifestyles and consumption activities to construct their identities in contemporary society (Haenfler, 2006; Jenks, 2005; Williams, 2011).

Deeply rooted in society and markets, subcultures help reveal present and future consumption patterns by highlighting potential modalities through which alternative identities and cultural forms may emerge. From the Hegelian dialectic, subcultures are considered the antithesis of mainstream culture (thesis) such that studying subcultures may offer a more complete understanding about the synthesis of our social world (Williams, 2011). The dialectic between subculture and (mainstream) culture may be extended to subcultural and mainstream music, characterized by Nietzsche’s (1993) notion of the dialectic between the Dionysian and Apollonian principles. This suggests that subcultural music represents the Dionysian principles of passion, chaos, irrationality, enchantment, raw energy, unpredictability, art, and creativity; whilst mainstream music represents the Apollonian principles of order, ordinary, mundane, comfort, security, passivity, rationality, logic, and reason.

The opening quote by Nietzsche advocates questioning the dogma, doctrines, traditions, and the dominant institutions of everyday life that underscore self-realization, self-knowledge, critical thinking, and freedom to help achieve self-creativity to express and transform the self and the world. This creative expression is grounded in the Dionysian conception of creativity illustrated in the Birth of Tragedy (Nietzsche,

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Table
Emerging themes of subcultural escapades.

Themes	Transformation	Sub-themes
Radical self-expression	Scripted role→presentational becoming	Performative Creative Resistive
Therapeutic praxis	Monotonic inertia→cathartic escape	Reenchanting Ideological Celebratory
Controlled chaos	Fixed sterility→reinvigorated passion	Camaraderie Trust Respect

1993) based on “a celebration of life’s creative cycles” (Gambino, 1996, p. 416). Art plays a role in this creative expression and transformation, and music is one of the most pervasive forms of art in contemporary society as well as a key component of subculture. The focus of this article is on subcultures shaped by eclectic constellations of style, ideology, discourse, artifacts, and resources as related to music that is largely perceived as antithetical to mainstream music and mass culture. These ‘Dionysian music subcultures’ such as punk, hardcore, metal, straight edge, grunge, old-school rap, electronica, post-punk, alternative rock, and others as a result of music subcultural defragmentation such as metalcore that emerged from a combination of subcultural elements and narratives of death metal and hardcore/punk music.

Subcultures have historically been studied by sociologists and cultural studies scholars (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Gelder & Thornton, 1997; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979; Jenks, 2005; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003). More recently, the concept of subculture has gained popularity in marketing and consumer research (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007; De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007; Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002; Kates, 2002; Kozinets, 1997, 2001; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Ulusoy & Fuat Firat, 2011) as contemporary subcultures are argued to be increasingly formed around consumer lifestyles, tastes, experiences, and practices (Frank, 1997; Hodgkinson, 2002; Muggleton, 2000; Polhemus, 1996, 1997; Thornton, 1995). Furthermore, shared extraordinary experiences seem to create value for consumers (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi, Ross, & Leigh, 1993; Tumbat & Belk, 2011) such that extraordinary consumption experiences are transformative, driven by social interaction (Arnould & Price, 1993) and grounded in shared lifestyle and leisure activities (Cova, 1997; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Subcultures might therefore play a key role in creating transformative and extraordinary consumer experiences – what the authors refer to as ‘subcultural escapades’.

The consumption of music plays a key role in subcultural formation and maintenance (Hebdige, 1979) that may include consumer experiences involving fun, feelings, and fantasy (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Although music is a key component of subcultural formation and maintenance, the music-subculture-identity relation has not attracted much attention in consumer research and marketing (Giesler & Schroeder, 2006). Existent studies have adopted a primarily monolithic approach to music bypassing collective and symbolic aspects in favor of the individual consumer (see Donovan, Rossiter, Marcolyn, & Nesdale, 1994; Kellaris & Kent, 1993; Yalch & Spangenberg, 2000) as well as categorizing music as popular and/or mainstream music, overlooking the perceived distinction between mainstream music and subcultural, underground music (see Gustafsson, 2015; Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Larsen, Lawson, & Todd, 2010; Shankar, 2000). Other studies have focused on subjective personal introspection (Holbrook, 1986; Shankar, 2000). As a result, few studies in consumer research and marketing have examined music consumption at the cohort level addressing the dynamic interplay between music consumption and self/identity making. One such study criticizes the dominant conception of music consumption that views music as a positive and healthy source for self/identity in the face of perceived negative social and historical processes embedded in music production and consumption such that “positive notions of authenticity

and autonomy have been incorporated into powerful ideologies.” Hesmondhalgh (2008, p. 343) that parallels the notions prioritized by the CCT tradition (see Arnould & Thomson, 2005) that place emphasis on “the active and reflexive agency of consumers.”

Drawing on postmodernism, Goulding et al.’s (2002) work on dance culture focuses on fragmentation of the self and emerging new communities. Moreover, subculture is presented as an evolving, creative force, rather than a reactive force that yields innovative and eccentric consumption patterns (Ulusoy & Fuat Firat, 2011). Subculture is therefore a process of meaning creation and exploration that fosters individual variation. Larsen, Lawson, and Todd (2009) offer a framework to explicate the process of how music consumption represents the self within a social context. Through their analysis on Goth culture, Goulding and Saren (2007, p.227) examine how subcultures provide commodification venues for consumers “to act proactively and productively in the market as entrepreneurs.” Drawing on the politics of music, Bradshaw and Shankar (2008) highlight the underlying ethical and ideological background in music by critically examining the interplay between production and consumption in music and in its use in the marketplace. According to Bradshaw and Holbrook (2008) in-store music is a mode of manipulation used for social control purposes which in turn undermines the aesthetic qualities of music. On the other hand, Giesler and Pohlman (2003) argue that online-music sharing platforms represent a way of socially taking control of, and emancipating, the music.

Music is critical because it “can captivate audiences, provide cathartic and embodied experiences, and ground identities and communities, but also introduce us to rich exchanges between peoples while somehow both reifying and subverting power structures.” (Bradshaw & Shankar, 2008, p. 225) Music symbolizes meaning (Larsen et al., 2010) and cultural resources through which subjectivities are molded as they are contested, negotiated and reconfigured in an ongoing process of enactment (Ulusoy & Fuat Firat, 2011). Consumers are theorized as producers of cultural sources, meanings and artifacts in the process (Holt, 2002). This notion is also in line with the CCT school of thought that examines the production aspect of consumption (see Arnould & Thomson, 2005) by exploring the cultural practices of consumers in their music consumption and production.

Studies in consumer research and marketing recognize the importance of consumption in the construction of subcultural meanings, experiences, and discourses such that music is a symbolic product with socially constructed meanings perceived as expressive and paradoxical through which cultural sources and meanings dynamically circulate. Yet they largely overlook the music consumption micro discourses on how consumers ascribe meaning to multifaceted subcultural practices that elicit transformative and extraordinary experiences resulting in identity narrative, identity projects and shared experiences and meanings based on their subcultural experiences. This leads to a superficial consideration to how consumers might experience identity transformations in a subcultural music context.

Since the ways in which music-based subcultures can work as a catalyst for transformative and extraordinary experiences have yet to be explored in empirical terms in marketing and consumer research, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on subcultural theory, consumer culture theory, and symbolic music consumption by exploring the nature of the experiences, meanings, and self-identities that are forged and fostered within Dionysian music subcultures. This paper explores the meanings over time that music-based subcultural practices have for their members, and the context and the nature of such experience from the perspective of self-identified subcultural members who engage in Dionysian music subcultures in everyday life.

2. Fragmentation of culture and the interplay of music consumption and subcultures

Jenks (2005, p. 140) notes that Nietzsche’s call of “God is dead” forces a paradigm shift that “has removed certainty; it has mainstreamed the re-

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