Overview of the Subcultural Theory

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Abstract: *Dick Hebdige, a prominent British literary theorist, in his seminal work Subculture: the Meaning of Style provides a profound exploration of the historical backdrop of subcultural dynamics through an extensive array of case studies. He systematically examines the genesis, functions, and significance of subcultural styles. Through an in-depth examination of Hebdige's text, this paper delves into his theory of subculture, reevaluates the processes behind subculture's emergence and incorporation , delves into the inevitability and enduring nature of subcultural existence, and unravels its latent value and deconstructive potential. Additionally, it convincingly refutes the notion that ″subculture is dead″ highlighting how subcultures incessantly evolve and flourish.*

Keywords: subculture; Dick Hebdige; Subculture: *the Meaning of Style*.

1. INTRODUCTION

On the intellectual landscape of subculture, the indelible presence of British literary theorist Dick Hebdige is irrefutable. As a research representative of the Centre for Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England, Hebdige emerged as a significant figure. In 1979, at the age of twenty-eight, he published his seminal work, Subculture: the Meaning of Style, which swiftly became one of the most widely read books in the cultural studies domain. This ground-breaking piece shed new light on the intricate intricacies of subcultures, establishing itself as a cornerstone in the field.

The book is thoughtfully divided into two main parts. Initially, Hebdige delves into representative cases of 20th-century subcultures, such as hipsters, the beats, the teddy boys, and the punks, unveiling the catalysts behind their formation and decline. He astutely examines the process by which these subcultures imbue objects with their unique meaning of style. In the second part, the author systematically analyzes and interprets the genesis, functions, and implications of subcultural styles.

With its daring blurring of the lines between scholarly discourse and accessible language, the book bridges the divide between professional academics and lay readers, cementing the legitimacy of "popular" or media culture as a deeply resonant field of study. It aptly accentuates the value and relevance of cultural studies in investigating emerging social formations and contemporary cultural phenomena.

This paper undertakes a meticulous examination of Hebdige's theory of subculture, delving deeply into the intricate process of subculture's emergence and assimilation. Moreover, it explores the untapped potential value that subcultures possess, hinting at their influence on broader social and cultural contexts.

2. WHY DO SUBCULTURE EXIST?

Dick Hebdige offers an insightful definition of subculture in Subculture: the Meaning of Style, intricately intertwined with the discussions on culture by eminent thinkers such as Raymond Henry Williams, Stuart Hall, Gramsci Antonio. Of particular significance is the conceptualization of "culture" by Lefebvre, who introduced the notion of "subculture": "Although, as Lefebvre has written, we live in a society where '. . . objects in practice become signs and signs objects and a second nature takes the place of the first – the initial layer of perceptible reality' (Lefebvre, 1971), there are, as he goes on to affirm, always 'objections and contradictions which hinder the closing of the circuit' between sign and object, production and reproduction." Lefebvre pointed out that the phenomenon of "second nature" replacing "first nature" in social life, that is, things are given new meanings, but the invasion of the second nature is always blocked by some kind of "objections and contradictions", and Hebdige further pointed out that "subculture" is exactly the:"objections and contradictions". On this basis, Hebdige further points out that "subculture" is precisely what Lefebvre referred to as "objections and contradictions":" In the following chapters we shall see that it is precisely objections and contradictions of the kind which Lefebvre has described that find expression in subculture."[1]

Indeed, the concept of youth subculture was not first introduced by Hebdige. Although "subculture" holds a broader meaning, in the twentieth century, it came to encompass groups of young people with distinctive styles and shared affiliation. Sociologists use the term "subculture" to describe an extensive array range of groups — ranging from sport fishermen to toy train enthusiasts — but it is most commonly associated with young people. The modern sociological and political notion of "youth" emerged as early as the 1870s, with a clear distinction between "youth" and "adolescent" on the basis of their ability to live independently. Talcott Parsons, a prominent sociologist, first coined the term "youth culture" in 1942, seeking to elucidate adolescent culture further.

In the 1920s, the Chicago School of Sociology was the pioneering institution to study the subculture of immigrant delinquent youth, with Robert E. Park proposing the theory of social disorganisation to explain the roots of urban subcultures, arguing that

in the process of rapid urbanisation, there was an increasing demand for new types of youth. Robert E. Park put forward the theory of "social disorganisation" to explain the root cause of urban subcultural communities According to Park, the rapid urbanisation process led to insufficient regulations and supervision on the newly emerging occupational and marginalised groups, resulting in numerousdeviant subcultural behaviours and communities. Howard Becker, on the other hand, argued that deviant behaviours were influenced by the social groups, especially the powerful ones. In 1955, Albert K. Cohen, in his work Delinquency Boys: the Culture of Gang, introduced the theory of "problem solving", positing that individuals' behaviour aims to address various societal challenges. Later, Stuart Hall criticized that the vague generalisation of the term "youth culture," asserting that it obscured the distinct situations in which different groups of young people, particularly those from different classes, found themselves. He advocated instead for the concept of "youth subcultures," which emphasized the impact of structural factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity on the formation of youth culture.

When analysing subcultural groups, prominent researchers often amalgamatethem with socio-cultural factors, highlighting the emergence of social issues. Hebdige further advances the foundation laid by earlier scholars by characterizing subcultures as manifestations of "objections and contradictions" that impede the encroachment of the second nature, disrupt the established social order, and, in essence, challenge the prevailing majority." Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance.Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority'', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus."[1] It is precisely because the "normalization" of society conforms to the behavioural habits of the majority and excludes minorities that there are dissatisfaction and interference from the neglected minorities with the "normalization". In any era, there are always a few whose voices are not valued, so they choose to voice their own cries in a style that is not the mainstream.

Hebdige's examination of subcultural groups goes beyond superficial observations, delving into the underlying social issues. His focus on "style" serves to substantiate the argument that "However, the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style."[1] Hebdige dedicates considerable attention to analyzing the punk youth subculture, employing style as a pivotal entry point for deeper investigation. This specific approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the subculture's nuances.

Hebdige initiates this exploration by providing a concise analysis of punk music style. Considering that punk music consists of a variety of musical aggregates, he goes on to scrutinize the emergence and evolution of associated styles like ghost thunder, rock and roll, jazz others. He carefully examines the development of the styles that derive from punk music, as well as t those that derive from the subculture's unique style. Moreover, Hebdige skillfully demonstrates the interconnectedness between the punk music subculture and its ties to black culture and race. Hebdige points out that subcultural groups discover a sense of solidarity, defiance, and individuality by embracing distinctive, non-mainstream clothing styles, which serve as markers of their membership within the subculture. This unique style often provokes disconcertment among parents, while simultaneously evoking fear and confusion among their peers. However, for the subcultural group itself, this distinct fashion becomes a powerful tool to reinvent their identity and assert their collective presence.

"Style" serves as a potent manifestation of the rebellious spirit within subcultural groups. A "subculture" primarily functions as a container that gathers diverse groups of young people whose emotions, clothes, music and norms deviate from the mainstream centre. By its very nature, it defies the notion of " normalization", and poses a threat to the unquestioned dominance of mainstream culture. Subcultures challenge societal boundaries, shattering certain barriers and pioneering breakthroughs. They exist in opposition to the prevailing mainstream culture, embodying an alternative and disruptive force. Due to their groundbreaking nature, subcultural groups that these groups have emerged as formidable agents of social change. They actively engage in reshaping of social norms in many parts of the world. These subcultures, propelled by their unique styles, defy the constraints of class, gender, and race, offering a profound challenge to traditional societal norms and perceptions.

Subcultures consist of minority groups that arise from marginalized social issues, become the focal point of Hebdige's argument, emphasizing the significance of exploring the cultural history of these youth movements to understand their rebellious nature. By positioning subcultures in opposition to the mainstream culture, Hebdige delves into the resistance by youth subcultures to the dominant societal norms and their eventual integration after confrontations. Through this comprehensive examination, a clear developmental flux of subcultures becomes evident, revealing the social and historical contexts that shape the evolution of youth subcultures.

3. PEEPING INTO THE RIFT OF THE TIMES FROM SUBCULTURE

Why does every youth subculture fade away after a while, but subcultures never cease to exist? Hebdige provides an explanation in the second part of his book, Subculture: the Meaning of Style, for the transient nature of youth subcultures and the perpetual existence of subcultures in general. He suggests that youth subcultures act as symbolic gaps in society, representing ruptures and dissonance. This rupture has never been disappeared in cultural history, although the gap is constantly being filled. Hebdige raises concerns about certain scholars' studies of subcultures, identifying problematic aspects:"More crucially, such an absence has ensured that while accounts based upon a participant observation approach provide a wealth of descriptive detail, the significance of class and power relations is consistently neglected or at least underestimated. In such accounts, the subculture

tends to be presented as an independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political and economic contexts. As a result, the picture of subculture is often incomplete. "[1]

Hebdige astutely highlights the inadequacy in fully and effectively exploring the context in which subcultures emerge. In response to the shortcomings of previous theories, he unveils a more appropriate approach to the study of subcultures. "Here at last was a reading which took into account the full interplay of ideological, economic and cultural factors which bear upon subculture. By grounding his theory in ethnographic detail, Cohen was able to insert class into his analysis at a far more sophisticated level than had previously been possible."[1] Hebdige astutely observes that the representatives of subcultures encompass not only members of these groups, but also individuals hailing from the working class, residing in impoverished slums, struggling to meet basic needs. Given the dual identity of subculture members, their culture needs become inseparably linked to their other identity.

Given the dual identities of subculture members, it becomes essential to link the culture of these groups to their other facets. Hebdige discerns that subcultural groups often emerge as "problem groups" within society, voicing specific demands that go unheard and remain unresolved. Therefore, these groups choose to use "subculture" to express their voices. Subcultures are closely related to the identity of the group, reflecting the existential problems of a certain group of people in a certain region at a certain time. Hebdigeoffers the following interpretation of punk subculture:" In the same way, the punks were not only directly responding to increasing joblessness, changing moral standards, the rediscovery of poverty, the Depression, etc., they were dramatizing what had come to be called 'Britain's decline' by constructing a language which was."[1]

At the heart of early punk was a deliberate anger at the prevailing system, challenging the soft rebellion of the hippie counterculture and condemning the commodification of rock and roll. Punk openly and explicitly challenged the traditions and norms upheld by the powers that be. Early punk served as a manifesto of discord, emerging in Britain with working-class youth denouncing harsh realities of recession and rising unemployment. They unmasked the hypocrisy of the wealthy elite while shedding light on the predicament and helplessness faced by black immigrants in Britain and the proletariat residing in impoverished slums. Punk pointed out the problems of the times through its heavy metal, exaggerated style, and the style was its way of speaking out, sharply and vociferously.

Hebdige also notes the implicit continuity between different subcultures. While a particular subculture may fade disappears from the public eye, its spiritual essence often endures, finding expression through the emergence of another subculture. This enduring essence is frequently manifested in the form of similar styles adopted by different subcultures. The evolution and transformation of subcultures are predominantly shaped by the constraints posed by numerous historical challenges within society. For instance, the reason why punk music exhibits similarities to the reggae genre:"To lay too much emphasis on the connection between the two groups does a disservice to a black community formed in centuries of the most naked oppression imaginable: a culture which, for better or worse, bears the stamp of a singular history and which, moreover, has at last begun to break away from the Master, to cohere in ethnicity. ""Blacks, on the other hand, never lose what is, in our society, the disability of blackness. They seem likely, at least for the foreseeable future, to remain at the bottom of the heap."[1] Due to the persistence of unresolved social issues, it is common to find certain stages of subcultures adopting a similar kernel or style as previous ones. In addition to the legacy of historical problems, new problems continue to sprout in the course of social development. With the gradual satisfaction of material conditions, people are plunged into spiritual difficulties. For example, the Japanese "landmine girl" embodies a sense of constant unpredictability and emotional instability; meanwhile the song Kill that Shijiazhuang Man performed by Youth Hostel band demonstrates the monotonous and uninteresting aspects of daily life, boldly opposing the banality of everyday existence and yearning for liberation.

Subcultures manifest diverse social and culture problems at different stages and in different regions. The existence of subculture is closely related to the identity of minority people, it symbolises the gaps in the society, reminds people to pay attention to social problems, and is an alternative warning.

4. THE VALUE OF SUBCULTURE REFLECTED IN THE INCORPORATION

Because subcultures are "objections and contradictions", ideologies are bound to pay attention to them and attempt to dismantle them, and Hebdige argues that the main way to dismantle subcultures is to incorporat them. "Eventually, the mods, the punks, the glitter rockers can be incorporated, brought back into line, located on the preferred 'map of problematic social reality'(Geertz, 1964)."[1] Hebdige argues that capital and ideology dissolve subcultural rebellion in two ways, both of which proceed in ways that transform subcultures into other cultures: "(1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form); (2) the' labelling' and re-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups–the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form) ."[1] at the point where boys in lipstick are 'just kids dressing up', where girls in rubber dresses are 'daughters just like yours'.

Young people who choose to devote themselves to a shocking youth culture are, as they are reproduced on television and in the newspapers, also repatriated to the positions that common sense has made available to them , but they are also "families", they are reproduced as they are on TV and in the newspapers, but are also repatriated to the positions that common sense puts them in (still seen as "beasts", of course, but also "family", "unemployed", "hip", "the newest", "unemployed", "up-to-date"). It is

through this ongoing process of restoration that the fractured order is repaired.

As subcultures have been assimilated into mainstream society, they have gradually become an integral part of the social landscape. The once rebellious image of the subculture has now transformed into a dominant narrative within the context of corporate capitalism, where the archetype of the 'bad boy' has been reimagined as the quintessential consumer. These subcultural groups were eventually co-opted, confined, and put on display like animals in a zoo, exposed for everyone to gawk at. This process of societal integration has torn them apart, and they are now subject to safe mockery from the audience, like items scanned with barcodes.

One cannot help but question: is the caged subculture dead? For years, many have voiced their concern over the commercialisation and incorporation of distinct style into the mainstream. This lament is not without validity; subcultures deviating from norms are no longer what they used to be, and it seems normal to deviate from them. It has been claimed that young people often choose off-the-shelf prefabricated subcultures, wear them for a few years, and then rejoin the "mainstream" culture that they never really left. These observations have led some to declare that subcultures have indeed met their demise. Indeed, subcultures are resilient and ever-evolving, and they never truly disappear. As one subculture becomes absorbed into mainstream culture, another emerges, developing outside the conventional subcultural terrain. For instance, while traditional punk may have shifted away from its original rebellious spirit, a new wave of punk, known as new age punk, is revitalizing the movement in a different form. Moreover, subcultures that may appear to have lost their influence can still leave a lasting impact by shaping and empowering other subcultures in more subtle ways. Punk, for example, initially expressed a societal framework that challenged and surpassed the dominance of corporate capitalism. As the Cold War era receded, punk's anarchist ethos spread to diverse social groups, serving as a metaphor for its continued relevance. The punk subculture, since its emergence in the early 1970s, has permeated various aspects of society. Even after the decline of classical subcultures, we witness the birth of new practices, ideologies, and ways of existence. The death of one subculture often paves the way for the rebirth of another, ensuring that subcultures remain an essential force in shaping cultural dynamics and social identities.

Based on the characteristics of the emergence and development of subcultures, it becomes evident that merely integrating subcultures does not solve the underlying issues. As a result, similar social problems may give rise to the next youth subculture. Although this new subculture may manifest in a different style, possess distinct qualities, and impact different groups of individuals, but the claims behind them are very similar.

This is one of the main reasons why different youth subcultures exhibit some degree of inherited continuity among them. For example, in the case analysed by Hebdige in the first part of Subcultures: The Meaning of Style, reggae, which represented the aspirations of black Africans and was s later absorbed by punk music. While the specific styles may differ, the underlying aspirations remain remarkably similar. It is essential to clarify that society cannot eliminate the existence of subcultures entirely; it can only modify the way they exist. As society tries to fill in the gaps through integration, the approach to filling them must be distinct: if the cracks are bridged fundamentally, that is, the problems behind the subcultures are fundamentally solved, then the cracks of the subculture will be truly filled in . However, if subcultures are merely superficially eliminated and their rebellious nature is outlawed without tackling the social issues at their core, new subcultures will inevitably emerge in the future, taking on a different facade. The abolition of subcultures is nearly impossible. Even if they collectively appear to lose their voice at a certain moment, they will find more subtle ways to express themselves, making their voicelessness a form of resistance and a means to make their presence felt. Subcultures persist and adapt, reflecting the enduring nature of the social issues they respond to.

Subcultures not only map social problems, but also have other potential values - spiritual values. "In 1961, Matza and Sykes used the notion of subterranean values to explain the existence of legitimate as well as delinquent youth cultures. Like Miller, the writers recognized that potentially subversive goals and aims were present in systems which were otherwise regarded as perfectly respectable. "[1] The spirit inherent in subcultures holds a certain value. Among the various aspects worth noting and analyzing, the spirit of skepticism stands out prominently. This skepticism within subcultures challenges the established order, questions the veracity of what is perceived, and even raises doubts about the feasibility of future possibilities.

Such skepticism leads individuals to maintain a critical stance towards the prevailing norms and beliefs. It triggers a process of deconstruction that affects the very fabric of culture, compelling people to question the inherent meaning of things. In the first chapter of Subcultures: the Meaning of Style, the author introduces the concepts of "first nature" and "second nature." The meaning of objects in human societies is given by "second nature", as illustrated by the meanings attached to specific objects. Some young people claim membership of a subculture through their personal behaviour or dress. Implicit in the existence of subcultures is a scepticism about the second nature, that is, about the meaning of objects, of things, which is very subversive because of the apparent contradiction between the first and the second nature, which appropriates the first and tampers with the reality of things. Without the shell of subculture, the aggression of second nature would be difficult to detect. The existence of subculture can make the contradiction explicit.

Dick Hebdige points out in Subculture: the Meaning of Style that the existence of subculture is the result of social development, "style" can reflect the characteristics of subcultural groups, the emergence of subculture is closely related to the history and era, and the identity of the group. The continuous evolution of subcultures demonstrates that claims of subcultures being extinct are not well-founded. It is essential to acknowledge that as subcultures evolve and assimilate, comprehensive research should delve

into the specific background of each subculture and closely follow their transformative processes. By doing so, we can more accurately reveal the true significance and meaning of these subcultures.

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