

The Evolution and Mainstreaming of Subcultures: Challenges and the Pursuit of Harmonious Coexistence

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Abstract:

With the rise of consumer culture, the diversification of personal identity needs, and the strong influence of social media, niche subcultures are gradually developing towards mass popularization. This article delineates the definitions of subculture articulated by scholars across different eras, exploring subculture's true essence and its gradual evolution into a "cultural mosaic" and penetration into mainstream culture. Combined with the statistics on the number of views of subculture content on social media, this paper reveals the widespread popularity of contemporary subculture. However, further investigation reveals various challenges and issues subcultures face, both internal and external, in mainstreaming, including social stereotypes, legal restrictions, conflicts with mainstream ideologies, and the inherent exclusivity of subcultures. Moreover, mainstreaming subcultures has introduced a series of negative effects, such as cultural alienation, the loss of original spirit and values due to commercialization, and the dilution and erosion of cultural essence. These phenomena pose a potential threat to the uniqueness of subcultures.

Keywords: Subcultures; mainstreaming; cultural mosaic; commercialization

1. Introduction

Since the early 20th century, with industrialization, urbanization, and modernization processes, niche subcultures have gradually emerged and influenced the globe through various social movements and waves of counter-mainstream culture. From the Bohemian movement in Paris to the Beat Generation and hippie movements in post-World War II America, and further to the punk and goth cultures of the 1970s, these subculture groups have resisted mainstream values through music, fashion, and social behaviors, seeking individual expression and social change. Entering the 1990s, the development of the internet brought forth new subcultures such as cyberpunk, and facilitated the formation of online subculture communities, leading to a more globalized dissemination and identification of subcultures. Then, in the 2000s, globalization and the popularity of social media dismantled the insularity of traditional subcultures, resulting in a fragmented and diversified landscape. With different cultural groups intermingling with each other, and individuals moving freely among multiple subcultures, forming the phenomenon of "cultural mosaic". This signifies that individuals within society can belong to varied subculture groups, and even within a single subculture, a multitude of branches and differences can exist [1]. This mobility reflects the diversity and flexibility of individual identities, with many peo-

ple exhibiting different cultural identities across varying social contexts, simultaneously blurring the boundaries between subcultures. Consequently, distinct subculture groups can coexist and influence each other, providing new impetus for the ongoing evolution of subcultures.

2. Findings and Discussions

2.1 Differences and Evolution of Subculture Definitions

2.1.1 Similarities and differences

Through a comparative analysis of various definitions of subcultures provided by scholars across different eras, it is evident that all definitions emphasize the distinction between niche subcultures and mainstream culture, whether based on ethnicity, geography, age, or lifestyle. At the same time, most scholars mention that subculture groups possess a unique value system, with distinct perspectives, aesthetics, and norms. However, differences exist within their definitions. One of the notable differences lies in the focus of the study. For instance, definitions posited by Broom and Selznick highlight social structures such as occupation, gender, and race, whereas others, such as those proposed by Robertson, Landis, and Henslin, center around lifestyle and cultural expressions. Another divergence relates to the nature of the groups. Schaefer and

Lamm emphasize the dynamic interaction between niche subcultures and mainstream culture, noting that members may shift between the two. In addition, Ken Gelder views subculture as a dynamic social phenomenon involving processes of cultural production and reproduction, significantly influenced by historical and social contexts, while other definitions tend to prioritize a static cultural distinction.

2.1.2 Evolution of definitions

From these diverse definitions of subculture, people can learn about the characteristics of subcultures' evolutionary process. The first point is the transformation in the primary expressions of subculture, from early definitions, such as that by Broom and Selznick in 1963, which tended to define niche subcultures from a structural social perspective, and as time progressed, definitions from MacLionis in 1997, as well as, Schaefer and Lamm in 1998 indicate a shift in the research focus toward cultural expressions, customs, and lifestyle. Moreover, there is a gradual increase in communication between subcultures and mainstream culture. As the interplay between niche subcultures and mainstream culture deepens, some scholars have begun to pay attention to how these subcultures evolve and transform within mainstream society, as evidenced by the studies of Robertson in 1977 and Schaefer and Lamm in 1998, which illustrate the rise of counterculture and its conflict with mainstream norms. The evolution of definitions reflects a gradual shift in academia from a focus on social categorization to more complicated analyses of cultural interactions, particularly in the context of globalization and mediatization, where the relationship between niche subcultures and mainstream culture is increasingly complex.

2.2 The Phenomenon and Reasons of Massification of Niche Subcultures

Based on the number of views of subculture tags on "Little Red Book", a popular social software in China, as of 16 August 2024, it can be concluded that subcultures in China have gained a high degree of attention, and many different styles of subculture related content have hundreds of millions of views, and among them, "Lolita culture" is far ahead of the attention and popularity. Also, through the survey, it can be found that many shopping websites have divided Lolita or other subculture clothing into some shopping categories, which proves that subcultures have certain amount of audiences and become gradually popular.

2.2.1 Consumer culture and commercialization

As subcultures attract increasing attention, brands and commercial organizations swiftly capitalize on the market

potential of these cultural movements. Major brands in fashion, music, and art are integrating subculture elements into their products, leading to the commercialization of subcultures. For example, elements from punk and street-style aesthetics are frequently incorporated into daily outfits and have even permeated nail art and cake designs, making them popular and commonplace. These distinctive elements capture public interest, stimulating consumer behavior while simultaneously amplifying the reach of subcultures.

2.2.2 Personal identity and self-expression

In contemporary society, the rapid development of the economy has intensified social competition, subjecting individuals to the burdens and pressures of work, study, and daily life, which has aroused their rebelliousness, driving people to seek ways to resist societal constraints and repression. At the same time, subcultures, characterized by their anti-mainstream ethos, offer significant appeal to young individuals who desire to transcend conventions or express dissent and serve as a vital avenue for young people to attain identity recognition. For instance, an individual who appears unremarkable in a school or workplace setting often finds themselves overlooked, however, when adopting the attire of a subculture or seamlessly integrating into its community, they can receive acknowledgment and praise from those who appreciate such style. This difference piques the curiosity of others as well, who may perceive their distinctive fashion and appearance as trendy or cool, consequently increasing their visibility. Thus, enthusiasts of subcultures can feel affirmed and valued, cultivating a sense of belonging and self-worth.

2.2.3 Support from the media and mainstream culture

With the popularity of the internet and social media platforms, the dissemination of niche subcultures has become significantly more accessible. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable specific subculture groups to rapidly gather on a global scale, and share and promote relevant subcultural content. This allows them to showcase their fashion, ideas, and lifestyles, attracting a larger amount of audience and piquing many individuals' interest in these cultural phenomena. Concurrently, as society becomes increasingly diverse, elements that once were seen as anti-mainstream or fringe are gradually being integrated into mainstream cultural expression. Mainstream media, television programs, and fashion have adopted elements of subculture, and through the editing efforts of various creators, certain figures within them gain attention for their distinctive styles. These individuals become widely recognized, leading to the emergence of trends.

3. Challenges and Issues

The acceptance of subcultures into mainstream culture has indeed brought about some positive effects, because, through massification, subcultures are innovated, widely disseminated, and accepted, with the values behind them being understood and shared by a wider range of people, which not only enhances the social status of subculture groups but also reduces misunderstandings and discrimination against these groups. Yet this process raises several issues.

3.1 Internal Factors

3.1.1 Exclusivity and De-elitism in subcultures

Subcultures exhibit a high degree of exclusivity, with the essence of opposing mainstream culture, or at least standing in contrast to it. This results in instances where mainstream culture and subculture may reject each other, particularly when their values, aesthetic standards, or behavioral norms conflict. Hebdige explores how subcultures articulate their resistance to mainstream culture through style and symbolic systems, indicating that mainstream culture often selectively absorbs the commercially viable aspects of subcultures while ignoring their rebellious spirit and that this process of “taming” is also an impediment to mass popularization [2]. As niche subcultures gain widespread acceptance and are absorbed by mainstream society, the distinctive cultural markers that once set them apart gradually lose their uniqueness. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ‘elitism’ is defined as the belief that some things are only for a few people who have special qualities or abilities [3]. It can be concluded that the process of “De-elitism” can result in a sense of disconnection for subculture followers, who may perceive that their culture has been over-consumed and misinterpreted by external groups, thereby losing its identity. Furthermore, the commercialization of subcultures exacerbates this issue. This is because when subcultures are embraced and packaged by mass media and the market, such commercialization results in the loss or distortion of their original essence. For instance, studies on street cultures, like Hip-Hop and skateboarding, reveal that when these subculture elements are integrated into fashion brands or advertisements, the members often perceive a dilution of their core values, provoking negative reactions [4]. Moreover, due to the frequent social and online attacks faced by subculture enthusiasts, their mental health can be jeopardized, causing them to question their identity or reinforce their animosity toward the mainstream. This dynamic exacerbates the tension between the two and deepens the isolation and exclusivity characteristic of subcultures.

3.1.2 Dilution of the essence of subculture

In the processes of massification or commercialization, the intrinsic essence and spiritual core of subcultures can become diluted and obscured, as mainstream society tends to extract only the most superficial elements of subcultures while neglecting the underlying cultural context and spiritual core behind them. Nowadays, numerous creators and businesses across various fields are deliberately incorporating subculture elements into their work to garner attention and traffic, and this commodification often brings about the overuse of subculture symbols, erosion by consumerism, and cultural hollowing. Because during commercialization, subcultures are repackaged as fashion trends, losing their initial rebellious spirit and social critique. Meanwhile, this creates a skewed understanding of subculture for the public, obscuring its cultural essence. For instance, the “Dopamine” aesthetic has become popular on the internet in recent years, with numerous influencers sharing posts about “Dopamine outfits,” and many businesses mass-producing clothing labeled in this style, gaining considerable attention. Nevertheless, many people conflate this contemporary popular style with “Decora”. In contrast to the “Dopamine” aesthetic, which emphasizes a seamless and elegant color palette to create a psychologically comforting visual experience, “Decora” originates from Japanese elements and is characterized by an ostentatious subculture style composed of vibrant colors, bold patterns, and an abundance of accessories. It emphasizes a strong visual impact, resisting the minimalism of mainstream aesthetics, and expresses individualism and fashion through pronounced visual shock. However, due to the overwhelming popularity of the term “Dopamine,” people define anyone wearing colorful clothes, including “Decora” enthusiasts, as “dopamine girls or boys”, labeling them as such by the mainstream. Subcultures, including the “Decora” style, embody a spirit of rebellion and counter-mainstream ideology. However, contemporary individuals have seemingly obliterated this rebellious essence through the concept of “dopamine dressing”. This phenomenon has elicited dissatisfaction and resentment among many subculture enthusiasts, who have expressed critical opinions regarding such labeling and commodification, asserting that their culture has not been respected, which further intensifies the tension between subculture advocates and the mainstream populace. Moreover, the emergence of terms like “light subculture” and “medium subculture” goes against the rebellious and free spirit of subculture itself, and instead frames and restricts subcultures. Additionally, subcultures are often greatly related to their origins, developing within specific social and historical contexts. But when they become mainstream and com-

mercialized, the inherent cultural backgrounds of these subcultures are often overlooked. For instance, hip-hop culture originated within African American communities in the United States, encompassing a spirit of resistance against racial oppression and social injustice. However, with the global popularity of hip-hop culture, many people just imitate its superficial music style and dressing style, while ignoring the social meaning and essential spirit behind it.

3.2 External Factors

3.2.1 Conflict and popular misconceptions

Subcultures, despite gradually becoming more accepted by the mainstream, often face resistance from conservatives and older generations who struggle to embrace them due to their inherent rebellious nature against dominant cultural norms, as well as, uniquely dressed and thought. This resistance is fueled by negative stereotypes and misconceptions, which associate subcultures with deviance, eccentricity, vulgarity, and self-destruction. Taking the example of Lolita culture, it is important to note that Lolita is essentially a street fashion originating from Japan in the 1970s typically associated with the Harajuku neighborhood in Tokyo [5]. It continues to be a celebration of femininity, modesty, cuteness, and beauty” [5]. However, because of the rapid development of social media, some individuals have exploited Lolita fashion as a means to gain attention by publishing suggestive or excessively juvenile videos and photos, which stigmatizes the Lolita subculture. This phenomenon has led to an association between Lolita and infantilization, as well as sexual innuendo. As a result, it not only exacerbates discrimination and prejudice against Lolita but also distorts and undermines the essence of Lolita culture, which aims to showcase and celebrate the intricate beauty of women and to rebel against contemporary gender roles. In reality, this subculture is not about the sexualization of women’s bodies, instead, it represents a cultural expression that challenges societal expectations of gender. Unfortunately, due to the misleading amplification effects of social media, Lolita enthusiasts face bullying and stigmatization both in their everyday lives and online. Another factor contributing to the social exclusion of the Lolita subculture is the discordance between its aesthetic and mainstream societal norms. Enthusiasts of Lolita fashion typically wear Victorian-style clothing, characterized by intricate skirts, lace, bows, and other decorations to create a “fairy-tale princess” image. This overly dreamy appearance clashes with the modern mainstream aesthetic and practicality, particularly in professional settings or public spaces where Lolita attire may be considered “inappropriate”

or “eccentric”. Today, individuals tend to adhere to more conservative and utilitarian dress codes, and the Lolita style can disrupt these established societal expectations, leading to misunderstanding and rejection from certain individuals [6]. Consequently, many participants in Lolita culture have been forced to compromise between personal preferences and social expectations, facing the dual dilemma of internal and external pressures. Additionally, the historical context of subcultures like the Beat Generation and the Hippies contributes to these negative perceptions and conflicts. Key figures from the “Beat Generation” of the 1950s, such as William Burroughs, author of “Naked Lunch” were involved in the trading of unauthorized goods and use of prohibited substances, alongside a history of long-term dependency issues. Renowned poet Allen Ginsberg was known for his recurrent legal troubles and mental health challenges [7]. These individuals expressed their dissatisfaction with societal norms through the use of substances, and their successors, the “Hippies” continued this tradition, experimenting with various psychoactive substances [8]. This illustrates that substance experimentation had become characteristic of the Hippie movement. Another central belief among Hippies was the promotion of personal freedom in relationships, which aimed to challenge traditional views on materialism and social norms. However, even if this movement achieved some of its goals, it also inadvertently led to significant social challenges, such as the spread of explicit content, and the relaxation of regulations concerning such content [9]. As a result, these backstories have contributed to the association of Hippies and other subcultures with unconventional and controversial behaviors, thus exacerbating the resistance and conflict regarding subcultures.

3.2.2 Legal and institutional restrictions

Some forms of subcultural expressions may infringe upon existing laws or conflict with societal norms. For instance, street graffiti, certain underground music scenes, or communities may engage in illegal activities or challenge the boundaries of the law. Therefore, government entities and laws often suppress or restrict these cultural activities, hindering subcultures from legitimately integrating into mainstream society, and even if certain aspects of subcultures are legal, their rebellious and nonconformist characteristics cause resistance from legal and social systems. Taking “graffiti culture” as an example, its origins can be traced back to the urban landscapes of 1970s America and subsequently spread to cities worldwide. Ferrell emphasizes that “graffiti” is not merely an act of vandalism but a distinctive form of cultural expression, characterized by high artistic merit and stylistic features. Graffiti artists utilize their creations to convey personal identity,

rebel against norms, and reclaim public spaces. However, laws criminalize graffiti through stringent policies, such as hefty fines, eradication measures, and surveillance mechanisms to prevent this creative act. This process reflects the power dynamics of urban managers over public spaces and visual culture, viewing graffiti as a challenge to established power structures and public order [10]. This regulation has led to the expulsion of many subcultural enthusiasts from the subway stations, depriving them of their right to use the transit system, underscoring the constraints that legal frameworks and societal norms impose on the mainstreaming of subcultures.

4. Conclusion

Based on the research study and analysis of the literature it can be concluded that subcultures are undergoing a process of mainstreaming, which enhances awareness and acceptance of niche cultures, but also poses several challenges and problems. Subcultures have become more accessible and assimilated into the mainstream, leading to broader understanding and a reduction in discrimination. Nevertheless, this mainstreaming comes at the cost of losing the original rebellious nature and core values of subcultures, and the commercialization of subcultures often reduces them to superficial elements, undermining their profound cultural significance. At the same time, various factors in popular culture impede the mainstreaming of niche cultures. As stated by national legislation, enthusiasts of subcultures should be respected and have the right to pursue their cultural identities. Therefore, mainstream

culture should foster inclusivity towards these subcultures, while subcultures should mitigate their isolationism. Both should demonstrate mutual respect and provide each other with a degree of privacy, aspiring to coexist harmoniously while avoiding threats to the essence of subcultures and the erosive effects of popularization. However, finding a viable pathway to achieve this harmonious state remains a topic worthy of discussion and further research.

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