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What Wasn't The Hipster?

"So… this is a hipster party?" I ask the girl sitting next to me. She's wearing

big dangling earrings, an American Apparel V-neck tee, non-prescription

eyeglasses and an inappropriately warm wool coat.

"Yeah, just look around you, 99 percent of the people here are total hipsters!"

"Are you a hipster?"

"Fuck no," she says, laughing back the last of her glass before she hops off to

the dance floor. (Haddow)

From blogs like *Look At This Fucking Hipster* to articles with titles like "Hipsters on

food stamps"[1] and "Kill the hipster: Why the hipster must die: A modest proposal to save

New York cool,"[2] few subjects are as safely and popularly derided as the so-called modern

hipster. Although rarely defined, people often describe the hipster as something that, to

paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart's stance on pornography, one knows when one sees it.

Alternatively, the hipster is anyone who denies being a hipster. This hipster denial has

become a popular punch line, as exemplified by *The Onion* article titled "Two Hipsters

Angrily Call Each Other 'Hipster.'"

Much has been made of the phenomenon of hipster denial, which is commonly cited

as evidence of both the cognitive dissonance and disingenuousness of so-called hipsters.

Hipsters are accused of fetishizing authenticity as a result of their own supposed inability

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[1] Salon.com, March 15, 2005
http://www.salon.com/life/pinched/2010/03/15/hipsters_food_stamps_pinched
[2] Time Out New York, May 30, 2007
http://newyork.timeout.com/things-to-do/this-week-in-new-york/8355/why-the-hipster-must-die

to contribute to society and culture. Analyzing a paper from *The Journal of Consumer Research*, a *Psychology Today* article contrasts the "millennial hipster" with the "admirable authenticity" of the beats and hippies of the '50s and '60s and concludes "[n]obody likes hipsters, not even hipsters" (Wise). This contrast between the authenticity of the subcultures of the past with the supposed ironic, disingenousness of hipsters is a common criticism of hipsters that I believe is inherently flawed. It both fetishizes and idolizes a past that never was and assumes a hipster subculture that simply does not exist. Instead, I propose that the supposed hipster subculture exists more as a marketing phenomenon than as a subculture like the original hipsters. Additionally, the supposed cognitive dissonance of hipsters is neither paradoxical nor new, but rather a logical extension of ideas inherited from the punk movement. Furthermore, I believe that this so-called denial is a natural and necessary reaction to both the increasing inescapability of marketing and a higher level of consumer awareness due to the Internet.

First, to understand why those who engage in behaviors associated with hipsterdom in the popular conscience would object to the term, we must try to come up with at least a working definition of what a hipster is. In an article for *New York Magazine,* "What Was the Hipster?" Mark Greif proposes the following definition:

> The hipster is that person, overlapping with the intentional dropout or the unintentionally declassed individual—the neo-bohemian, the vegan or bicyclist or skatepunk, the would-be blue-collar or postracial twentysomething, the starving artist or graduate student—who in fact aligns himself both with rebel subculture and with the dominant class, and thus opens up a poisonous conduit between the two. (Greif 1)

Greif then goes on to discuss the origin of the term hipster itself, tracing it back to a black subcultural figure as described in Anatole Broyad's essay "A Portrait of the Hipster" in the '40s that was then adapted into the white subcultural figure of Norman Mailer's "The White Negro," so-named due to the "desire of a white avant-garde to disaffiliate itself from whiteness… and achieve the 'cool' knowledge and exoticized energy, lust, and violence of black Americans" (Greif 2). According to Greif, the essence of both of these hipsters is their focus on what Broyard called "a priorism" or a superior knowledge gained not from reasoning and interacting with the world but by drawing upon one's self, as only such knowledge could be truly unique and one's own.

The revival of the term hipster in 1999 coincided with a brief flirtation with fifties and Beat fashion ("goatees, fedoras, *Swingers*-style duds" (Greif 2)) among a subset of the indie subculture. However, rather than fetishizing the perceived energy, lust, and violence of black Americans like the hipsters before them, they fetishized these same attributes as perceived in "white trash," as exemplified by the popularity of such stereotypical things as "trucker hats; undershirts called 'wifebeaters,' worn alone; the aesthetic of basement rec-room pornography, flash-lit Polaroids, and fake-wood paneling; Pabst Blue Ribbon; 'porno' or 'pedophile' mustaches; aviator glasses; Americana T-shirts from church socials and pig roasts; tube socks; the late albums of Johnny Cash; tattoos" (Greif 2).

Greif calls these early 2000s hipsters the White Hipster, then declares that these were succeeded by what he refers to as the Hipster Primitive, due to the popularity of both wilderness imagery and the revival of early synthesizers in music, as well as the revival of vinyl records. However, he fails to describe why exactly these so-called Hipster Primitives should be seen as successors to the previous White Hipsters. The majority of those

following the Hipster Primitive model were never a part of the original White Hipster subculture, and prominent White Hipster figures, like *Vice* Magazine's founder Gavin McInnes, never transitioned to the Hipster Primitive model. Thus, we must assume that these Hipster Primitives are so-called because they fit Greif's earlier definition of an individual aligned with both rebel subculture and the dominant class.

However, if we actually consider this definition, it quickly becomes problematic. Virtually any youth subculture can be interpreted to fit this definition, as young people, even those wanting to rebel against the dominant class, are nonetheless limited in power and thus to some degree dependent upon and subject to the dominant class. Just as there are modern hipsters squatting in abandoned warehouses like punks, there were hippies who went corporate to pay their bills. This struggle cannot be attributed uniquely to those referred to as hipsters, although, due to the rise of blogging and social media, their own struggles with this dynamic are much more visible and available than in prior generations.

Then what *is* a hipster? As far as I can tell, its usage has come to mean any young person who is or appears to be making a conscious effort to be stylish. It has become so decontextualized, that even the trappings associated with it, like skinny jeans, are so mainstream that they cannot be considered subcultural at all. Another telling sign is the lack of major unifying trends between the artists and music whose followers are often referred to as hipsters. Artists like MGMT, Animal Collective, Fleet Foxes, M.I.A., and Dan Deacon all are frequently cited as examples of music for hipsters, but if one actually considers these artists' repertoires it becomes obvious just how different they are. For example, although Greif is quick to lump Fleet Foxes and Animal Collective together due to the nature imagery evoked by their names and a mutual use of harmony (Greif 3), anybody

who compares the Fleet Foxes' self-titled album, with its sparse acoustic arrangements and traditional choral harmonies, and Animal Collective's *Strawberry Jam*, which opens with relentless, pulsing, heavily produced electronic wailing and a casual half-spoken vocal line, would be incredibly hard pressed to argue that the two are operating within the same genre. Unlike punk, where the punk artists themselves defined what became known as punk, when it comes to hipsters, the music becomes retroactively lumped together based off of perceived trends in its listeners. In his paper "What Is Indie Rock?" Ryan Hibbett argues that indie rock is not merely an aesthetic genre, but a term used for social differentiation, basing his argument on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital." Under this argument, by unifying the music under the term indie rock, enthusiasts are able to enjoy a sense of power and knowledge due to their participation in an "other" category (Hibbet). However, in the case of music that has been associated with hipsters, I believe there is an inverse cultural capital. Because of the tradition of music as cultural capital in the indie rock subculture that highly influenced the stylistic markers of modern hipsterdom, there has been a reaction against the idea that a listener should be able to gain cultural capital through music, and thus hipsters are accused of listening to music in order to be "hipper than thou" rather than because of personal tastes. Ultimately, there is no particular musical or artistic genre to unify the supposed hipsters as a true subculture.

Criticisms of modern hipsters simultaneously try to judge them by forcing onto them a now derogatory label that was never really their own and accusing them of disingenuousness for reacting with resentment when expected to categorize themselves and self-identify based largely off of their own consumer choices, a label that persists regardless of even how those consumer choices evolve. Such an expectation is illogical, and

shows a fundamental misunderstanding of both the values of those labeled hipsters and the way that consumer trends are marketed and manufactured. Critics of hipsters either ignore or mock the fact that hipsters do not generally wish to associate their personal identity with their consumer choices. However this desire comes not from a source of delusion but rather from an acceptance of our overwhelmingly consumer culture. Rather than an example of denial, their rejection of labels based off of these choices is a sign of acceptance that their tastes, from music to fashion, are developed not in a vacuum of individuality but rather within the context of a competitive market, a market that is ultimately controlled by large businesses and manipulated by marketing and consumer behavior experts.

In order to truly understand those that are called "hipster," we have to look at them in the context of modern day marketing and fast fashion, and acknowledge the commercialization and aesthetic appropriation of counterculture by mainstream fashion and art. Fashion in particular has a long history of recycling and appropriating aesthetic elements of subculture. One prominent example of this is the appropriation of punk elements by designers: "In fashion, the latest high black Balenciaga boots, a sip at £700, are pure designer punk, as is much of the post-seventies work of Galliano, John-Paul Gaultier, Franco Moschino, Alexander McQueen, Rifat Ozbek, etc" (Strongman, 254). However, in an era where retailers like Forever 21 can rush a knock off into stores even before the designer's ready-to-wear version reaches Neiman-Marcus, the speed at which designers and retailers can reflect trends is so fast that it appears simultaneous to an outsider. This, combined with the explosive spread of amateur fashion photography on social media has allowed retailers to repackage trends so quickly that they become mainstream before they can ever develop a true subcultural following. The fact that few would accuse a woman

wearing the ₤700 Balenciaga boots of being a punk but many would call a teenager in an Urban Outfitter's ensemble that similarly knocked off street fashion aesthetics a hipster further demonstrates that outsider views of hipsterdom are erroneously attributing subcultural status to mere consumer choices.

Furthermore, marketers use techniques like product seeding, a more subtle and invasive form of product placement, in an attempt to manipulate trends. For example, Marisa Brickman, director of event marketing and public relations at Cornerstone Promotion, describes in a *Businessweek* article how she "set up the Levi's-*FADER*S Trading Post [at South by Southwest music festival in Austin], an invite-only tent with free music and free beer for scenesters and swag for a clutch of chosen bands." She added, "We booked all the bands and scheduled [them] to get outfitted in Levi's" (Fine). Ultimately, the trends associated with hipsters are not subcultural at all, but are largely just mainstream youth fashion.

Even disregarding the lack of a true hipster subculture, label denial is hardly a new phenomenon, and was largely present in the supposedly more authentic punk movement, and many of the post-punk subcultures. In *Inside Subculture: the Post-Modern Meaning of Style*, David Muggleton interviews members of a variety of subcultures. He asks some of them if they identify with a particular group, and while some are able to respond immediately with a label, they are quick to identify the particular community and ideological aspects that allow them to feel comfortable with those labels. However, the reactions become much more reserved when he poses the question "Do you think of yourself as belonging to some type of people because of the way you dress? Or identify with some type of people because of the way you dress" (69). While many answer in the

negative, others try to find labels, but invariably use qualifiers ("…a bit Mod-y…but I wouldn't call myself a proper Mod" (70) or "Punk-ish…only 'cos it's a convenient form of reference" (71)).

Given the trouble that even seemingly proud members of subcultures that developed their own identifying labels have with claiming those labels on a personal level, it should come as no surprise that those given the outside, pejorative label of hipster would not blithely accept it. We shouldn't accuse them of denial or condescendingly insist, as Wise does, that their "subconscious brains have to work double time so that they can convince themselves that the things they buy do not reflect on their true character" for not choosing to use their status as a member of a particular marketing demographic as a self-identifying label. Instead, we should instead recognize that very few people engage in this sort of thinking at all.

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