Musical Identity Online:
A "Netnographic" Perspective of Online Communities

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Abstract *Today's technology enables consumers to trade millions of dollars, conduct online banking, access entertainment, and do countless other activities at the click of a button. Online social networks (OSN) have become a cultural phenomenon that allows for individualistic consumerism. Consumers are increasingly utilizing OSN to share ideas, build communities, and contact fellow consumers who are similar to themselves. The relevance of online communities to the music is immense especially because musicians are now using social media to build global audiences. Not only is information about music and performance disseminated online, but musical commodities are sold and traded online. Online music communities allow consumers to elect and create new identities online through the purchase of subcultural commodities. Given the growing economic importance of online music communities it is important to get a holistic view of subcultural communities online.*
This study utilized content analysis of online music community websites using the Netnography methodology as developed by Kozinet for data collection to analyze consumers' purchasing and consumption behavior of subcultural commodities online as related to the formation of subcultural identities. Findings showed that subcultural items are predominantly purchased online, especially digital music, and there is a need for more custom craft items. The authors presented a new conceptual taxonomy of online subcultural consumer classifications based on online behavior patterns.

Key words *subcultures, music, clothing, consumption, netnography*

Today's technology enables consumers to trade millions of dollars, conduct online banking, access entertainment, and do countless other activities at the click of a button. Online social networks (OSN) have become a cultural phenomenon that allows for individualistic consumerism, personalized marketing based on individual desires. Consumers participate in online communities/subcultures to share knowledge of products, exchange experiences, and make inquiries about products, thereby potentially having a significant impact on consumer buying decisions (Baumbach & Belz, 2010). To succeed, retailers must understand how their customers prefer to interact with them and present potential customers with a consistent merchandising and transactional experience across all of their customers' preferred touchpoints.

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Increasingly, consumers are using OSN for electing and creating new identities online through the purchase of subcultural commodities.

Social media have dramatically changed the ways in which consumers communicate with each other as well as how consumers gather and exchange information about products and how they obtain and consume them (Henning-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera, 2010). Internet and virtual communities have transformed consumers, societies, and corporations with widespread access to information, better social networking and enhanced communication abilities (Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007). Social networks are emerging as a new domain for consumers to communicate, connect with friends, and learn about new trends (Pookulangara & Koestler, 2011) with approximately 31% of Internet users reporting blogs and Facebook influence their purchase decisions followed by groups/forums (28%) ("2013 Digital Influence", 2013). Therefore, it can be stated that companies can gain a better understanding of the consumer by analyzing online conversations that consumers spontaneously share on social media.

The objective of this article was to analyze consumers' purchasing and consumption behavior of subcultural goods online as related to the formation of subcultural identities. This research sought to understand the primary function of online communities for several music subcultures, especially with respect to the transfer of information about subcultural commodities. Retailers, on and offline, should attempt to fully understand who, and how, to target these virtually untapped markets by mainstream commerce. With an understanding of subcultural dynamics in this new consumption environment, retailers can capitalize off of subculturalists desire to create new identities with material goods and services from two very lucrative and socially significant markets, the apparel and the music industries.

Literature Review

Subcultures and Subcultural Capital

Subcultures are loosely affiliated groupings of people with common interests, who display their unity in material objects such as dress (Brooker, 2002). Subcultures often serve as an adaptation to mainstream culture for contemporary youth, where subcultural elements are used to build one's identity and establish autonomy from the mainstream and authority. They are often organized around similar tastes in, and consumption of, music and its related socializing (Lull, 1992). Members of subcultures are provided with a sense of belonging and comradeship, and a creativity outlet. Subculturalists are usually known for the distinctive styles including fashions that they create themselves. A subculture also provides a novel identity or stylistic uniqueness for its members.

Historically, music subcultures have been vehicles for social change, reshaping social norms all over the world (Lull, 1992). Music subcultures are frequently associated with political disengagement and creative processes such as fashion, art, and music. Today, music subcultures are lifestyles for consumers to buy into. Music is not only an expression, but also a commodity. Music is one of the most popular forms of entertainment, and singers are society's fashionable trendsetters. The consumption of clothing

becomes a means of identifying with one's role models, such as musical artists. Both music and fashion also offer consumers a fantasy lifestyle through consumer culture (Miller, 2011).

According to Janice Miller (2011), the music and fashion industries are directly related because they are equally powerful forces in consumer culture. Both music and fashion allow consumers to identify with, or embody, a distinct cultural image and those constructed ideologies associated with the image. Subcultural clothing and adornment are symbolically significant within the group. Dress presents a visual form of social cohesion. Being "in fashion" determines whether an individual is "in" or "out" within a particular group, although members of the subculture may not be consciously aware of the external norms that are responsible for their look (Hebdige, 1979). In this sense, clothing is used as *subcultural capital*. Sarah Thornton (1997) coined the term, subcultural capital, to represent cultural knowledge that is accumulated through socialization. In reference to subcultures, knowledge includes information on the slang, speech patterns, ideology, political views, and history of the subculture as well as the venues for music-performance and specialty shops for clothing and music purchases. Subcultural capital also includes cultural goods such as clothing, hairstyles, records or CDs, magazines, tattoos, and other tangible artifacts associated with the image of the subculture (Hebdige, 1979). The amount of subcultural capital a member accrues suggests a degree of commitment and allegiance to the subculture in question and grants status upon the owner in the eyes of fellow subculturalists (Muggleton, 2000; Thornton, 1997).

Consumer Consumption of Music and Clothing

The global music industry is worth $168 billion annually, and musicians are now using social media to build global audiences ('How Much', 2011). Information about music and performance is not only disseminated online, but musical commodities are sold and traded online. Stores in Europe have already seen drastic shifts in music exchanges that threaten large music retailers with permanent closure (Pfanner, 2013). The Internet provides a space for individuals to engage freely with each other about the music and for bands to maintain communication with their supporters and promote their events, in addition to providing an open space for subcultural commodification.

The global apparel industry is equally lucrative with a worth of $1.175 trillion at the end of 2011, and predicted to value at $1.348 trillion by 2016 (Thomasson, 2012). According to eMarketer Newsroom (2012), apparel is driving U.S. online retail sales growth and accounted for $40.9 billion in apparel sales in 2012.

Online communities, purchasing subcultural commodities, and subcultural identities

Online communities

Online communities are groups of people with shared interests and lifestyles who come together for the shared purpose of building relationships and learning from one another and making "an impact on the society or culture around them" (Bowler, 2010, p. 1271). Advances in technology and mass media have created a new space for the transfer of information, which in turn has popularized online communities and music scenes. In comparison to traditional subcultures, online communities are lacking in

face-to-face interaction, which allows for anonymity and personal reinvention. Most communication takes place online, where the level of online contribution defines one's roles and status within the online community. People are increasingly using online spaces to share ideas, build communities, and contact fellow consumers who are similar to themselves. The Internet appears to be an ideal venue for the global audience who is seeking entertainment without serious lifestyle commitments. One should understand that computer mediated collectives are not simply reformations of the face-to-face communities. They are usually cultures/systems with their own history, values, and rules within a new social space, which allows for subcultural identification and change. Therefore, the approach to studying and understanding online communities must be very different from traditional subcultures (King, 2008).

The purchase of subcultural commodities online.

Online communities have become important agents of value in digital commerce. Today, consumers look to, and participate in, online communities as sources of inquiry, to write reviews and share knowledge of products, exchange product/service experiences with other consumers, as well as discuss product needs and desires (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Online connections can also influence consumers buying decisions through electronic word of mouth (eWOM). In a study on the Gothic subculture Paul Hodkinson (2004), found that online communities not only served as a space for the creation of shared identities but also as a network for commerce. The inclusiveness of online communities tends to generate the development of loyalty by socially reinforcing and encouraging consumption. Observations of the ongoing information exchange process allow researchers to gain valuable insight of consumers' wants and needs, choices, and to optimize the availability of products or services.

Online communities and subcultural Identity.

The availability of subcultural choice negates a sense of subcultural authenticity. According to Muggleton (2000), post-subculturalists do not have to worry about rules, ideological commitment, or even the contradictions between their identities. Postmodern theories of subculture focus more on the individual and their individual degree of involvement within the subculture, generally through the consumption of subcultural capital and the creation of their identity (Blackman, 2005). Online scenes are created in spaces on the Internet, such as online forums, or websites where identities are performed. Members rarely meet in person, instead conducting all communication online. Unlike the offline identity, the online social identity can be associated simultaneously with a series of online scenes rather than only one. However, members of online communities still seek the collective facet of identity that is characteristic of traditional subcultures, but they find it in a two-dimensional format where they can "try on" identities for short periods of time. Subcultural dress is not required when sitting in front of a computer screen. However, if a member chooses to transition into the realm of reality, the online scene serves as a resource when it comes time to visually demonstrate their subcultural involvement through the use of subcultural goods.

Netnography

Netnography is a qualitative methodology that adopts the core fundamentals of ethnography and applies them to an Internet setting to explore the behaviors of individuals existing in online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Online communities, like social networking sites, blogs, video casts, and podcasts are becoming more popular, which creates an increasing need and use of netnography (Bowler, 2010).

While all methods of research and observations are extensive, elaborate, and time consuming, ethnography takes a significant investment and multiple resources because face-to-face research and intrusive questioning is unavoidable (Kozinets, 2002). However, when applying this method of research to online communities, the intrusive aspect of the research no longer exists (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is not only less intrusive, but also less time consuming (Kozinets, 2002). Because netnography is done in observational form online, data are plentiful and easy to obtain consistently (Kozinets, 2002). The observations of online communities are made in existing environments, which is not constructed by the researcher, thus creating a more naturalistic means of research. This is beneficial because consumers tend to be more open and honest online in their natural setting than in a forced fabricated setting. According to Reynolds and Xun (2010), other positive aspects of netnography are (1) researchers have a greater accessibility to broader groups of respondents, (2) there is more continuous research available, (3) netnography is more convenient and economical, (4) netnography provides more flexibility for observations and analysis of the research, and (5) there is a more reflective quality of online conversation within the communities.

Via netnography researchers can access consumer discussions through the observations of these online communities, or even participate with them in the forums. As mentioned previously, consumers participate in online communities to share and exchange information about products with other consumers. Researchers use the exchange of eWOM in online communities to gain great insight on consumers wants and needs, choices, issues, preferences of products or services, as well as areas in need of attention, change, or eradication.

Methodology

In order to keep up with a shift towards an experiential marketing paradigm, it is necessary to address other types of methodologies (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). Therefore, this study utilized Kozinet's qualitative research model for conducting netnographic research (see Figure 1).

All data were collected online in order to unobtrusively look at naturally occurring behaviors. The data analysis for this study was conducted in two stages. Data were coded using a Grounded Theory method. Online conversations were transcribed and then coded by the researchers using the open-coding method. Open-coding is a component of Grounded Theory and is the process involving identifying, coding and categorizing the main ideas found in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This allowed for the creation of categories where patterns of consumption and correlations between online identity and consumption behavior could be identified. After independent analysis by the researchers, four consumption

patterns emerged, which will be discussed in detail later.

Figure 1.
Research methods model

In phase one, observations were made for a period of two months in online music-related community websites, looking specifically at participants' discussions about purchases and consumption of music and clothing as related to their subcultural identities. The websites for each genre were selected based on an organic search on Google search engine. The organic search automatically lists the top websites using the specific keywords. The netnography methodology was purely observational, where the researchers did not fully participate as members of the online communities, but rather as a non-participant "lurker". The authors were especially interested in what was being purchased, the venue of these purchases, and related purchase behaviors. Table 1 provides further detail about the websites where observations took place. Each subculture was chosen because of its current or growing popularity, and the sites were chosen because of its known popularity within the offline subcultural communities. Punk and goth have endured as music genres and as mass-mediated cultures for years. Dieselpunk and Steampunk are fairly new subcultures with little, to no, offline contact. The popularity of the websites used in this study was confirmed after a simple Google search for discussion forums in each genre returned the respective online communities.

The observations were coded in the following categories: (1) forum site; (2) items being purchased; (3) from where the items were being purchased; (4) the gender of the participant; (5) age of the participant (if known); (6) geographical location of the participant (if known); (7) online vs. brick and mortar preference; (8) additional discussion about the merchandise and/or purchase venue.

Phase two of the study included one week of examining user's public profiles and recording observations for the following: (1) total number of posts; (2) number of community friends (if known); (3)

duration of time in the community (if known) recorded in months; (4) theme of the discussions partici-

pated in or initiated. Observations were conducted on the aforementioned websites, with the exception of MySpace because the criteria mentioned above were not easily accessible. The authors only observed forums targeted towards the discussion of dress and/or music for this phase of the project. With this data the participants could then be categorized into one of four classifications of online participants: (1) newbie, (2) weekend warrior, (3) marketer, (4) gatekeeper/peddler (see Figure 2). This new taxonomy was adapted from the design created by Misra, Mukherjee and Peterson (2008) in their study of healthcare websites. The current taxonomy in this study is innovative and constructed around specific subcultural substance. This classification system was also based on the distribution of observations specific to each website. For example, the duration variable for Dieselpunks.org could not be recorded the same manner as AbsolutePunk.net because Dieselpunks.org is only three years old, whereas AbsolutePunk.net has existed for at least ten years.

Table 1.
Observation websites

Website/forum	Description
Myspace.com	A social networking site with a strong music emphasis
Dieselpunks.org	A local website devoted to the Interbellum period and all things Dieselpunk
www.theSteampunkempire.com/forum	A forum dedicated to aficionados of the Victorian era
www.Goth.net/forums/	A multi-faceted forum for all things Gothic and Steampunk
www.absolutePunk.net/forum.php	A definitive source for Punk rock news

Results

In phase one of data analysis, a total of 109 observations were made. The only demographic information easily available was gender and geographic location. The majority of the individuals in the forums were males (n=70). The remaining participants were females (n=37), and two accounts were registered as gender neutral

Forum participants are not always required to indicate their geographical location. Therefore, the majority of participants (73%) never specified a geographical location. Of the remaining 27% of participants, 21 indicted that they were located in the US, 2 participants were in Canada, 4 in Europe, 1 in South America, and 1 in Australia. Actual physical location is obviously not important in online space where alternate realities and identities can be created. This is not an important factor and thus was not taken into consideration for data analysis. Similarly, none of the forums investigated required age to be published online; hence, this variable was not considered for further analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Demographic Information

N	Gender	Percentage
70	Male	64%
37	Female	34%
2	Gender Neutral	2%
109		100%

The results from the first phase of observation were categorized in the following manner:

Product

The most sought after product on all sites was digital music. The AbsolutePunk.com forum had the most discussion of music downloads. The next highest ranked product was general Gothic attire, which is to be expected because Goth is a very visual subculture with a consistent stylistic theme (Hodkinson, 2004). Music videos followed up Gothic attire as a most sought- after product in online discussions. Finally, re-sults showed that men's boots and women's corsets were popularly sought-after items for purchase. The men who sought boots participated in either the Steampunk or Dieselpunk subculture. Many were looking for boots of high quality at a reasonable price and in their specific size. The women were seeking cor-sets, a common form adornment of the Victorian period, and of participants in the Steampunk subculture (see Table 3). Unlike Punk and Goth, Dieselpunk and Steampunk are fairly new subcultures with little, to no, offline contact. Dressing in subcultural styles generally takes place only at meetups and con-ventions, therefore more time is put into creating a complete, formulaic Victorian or Interbellum costume, which generally requires boots for men and corsets for women.

Table 3.
Product and Purchase Location

Popularity Rank	Product	Purchase Location
1	Digital music	Online music/video streaming websites
2	General Gothic attire	Specialty online shops
3	Music videos	Online auction/community sites
4	Men's boots	Thrift shops/Salvation Army
5	Corsets	Online channel of brick-and-mortar retailer

Purchase location

The top purchase location was online music/video streaming websites for free or purchasable downloads. The second most popular location for purchases discussed in forums was specialty online shops with no brick-and-mortar location. These are often small business start-ups by subcultural members themselves

selling specialty hand-crafted products. They frequently advertise their merchandise in forums on fashion and clothing threads. The third most popular location for purchases mentioned in the online forums was online auction and community sites (i.e., Amazon, Ebay, Etsey) (see Table 3). This correlated with the uniqueness, sizing, and lower cost of the product people were seeking.

Pre-purchase discussion

Pre-purchase discussions of products primarily addressed how it related to the music scene on a socio-cultural level, such as the appropriateness of wearing certain garments and how well they approximate the authentic "look" of the subculture. Many members discussed other websites where they get inspiration for creating subcultural looks through "modding" (modifying a cultural artifact from its original format, generally a contemporary good to make it look antique). Many subculturalists still follow the tenets of DIY aesthetic, or in part by modifying/deconstructing contemporary garments to make them look appropriate for each respective subculture. Steampunks and Dieselpunks often talk about websites for patterns so they can sew their own clothes. Other people join forums solely to peddle their own wares. They have started their own businesses selling customized garments that match the sartorial standards of the subculture (i.e., Victorian era jackets for men, bondage pants, and WWII era aviatrix flight suits).

The data were further analyzed for each individual website to get a holistic view of the subcultures and conversations with respect to products and channels (see Table 4).

Steampunkempire.com

On this site, Men's boots and women's corsets were the product mentioned as the most frequently purchased. More than half of the participants (67%) were males. These results were to be expected, being that this is a subculture that revolves around technology and the sexually disparate world of Victoriana. The most popular purchase venues were specialty online shops with no brick-and-mortar location and online auctions/community sites. The discussion participants were mostly concerned with sizing in their discussions.

Goth.net/forums

The majority of people were looking for general Gothic attire. Online auctions/community sites and thrift shops were the most popular purchase location for Gothic products. The participants were mostly female (68%). Most participants were concerned with price in their discussion of products. Many Goths in the forums seek advice about their overall appearance from tattoos to shoes.

Dieselpunks.org

The majority of consumption was of Dieselpunk videos. The participants indicated that most purchases were made on online music/video websites and online auctions/community sites. All observed par-

ticipants for this cohort were males. Discussions generally involved the creation of alternate personas through the use of dress, much like Steampunk. Most extraneous discussion entailed clothing inspirations or specialty patterns (suggesting that their dress is more "costume" than daily wear). However, there are individuals that that do wear elements on a daily basis. Members frequently posted photos on thread of themselves in items they have made themselves, which are not necessarily for sale. The images were posted solely for admiration, inspiration, and critique.

AbsolutePunk.net

Participants largely consumed digital music. The primary purchase location was online music/video websites. 62% of the participants were male. The majority were concerned about price of products in their discussions.

MySpace.com

Like AbsolutePunk.net, electronic music files were the primary product consumed on MySpace.com. The primary purchase location is Online Music/Video Websites. The majority of participants were males (73%).

Table 4.
Subcultural Breakdown

Subculture	Distinguishing Characteristics
theSteampunkempire.com	67% of the participants were male; the primary products being purchased were men's boots
Goth.net/forums	The majority of participants were female (68%) and they were looking for general Gothic attire
Dieselpunk.org	The majority of participants were consuming Dieselpunk music videos and all participants were male.
AbsolutePunk.com	The primary product being consumed was digital music files; 62% of the participants were males
MySpace.com	The primary product being consumed was digital music files; 73% of the participants were males

In Phase two of the observations, (see Table 5) the information was analyzed to suggest a classification for each individual based on their consumption patterns as well as online behavior (see Figure 2). Individuals with very little community ties (few friends), and who made little discussion about consumption activities were usually newcomers to the online community. They were often seeking advice or acting as causal browsers within the community. The authors have labeled them, *newbies*.

Table 5.
Phase Two Observations (n= 25 for each website)

Statistics	Steampunkempire			Goth.net			Dieselpunk.org			AbsolutePunk		
	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max
Posts	165.52	1	2747	939.28	22	9249	217.84	2	2026	4453.08	34	44324
Friends	84.16	2	1243	–	–	–	20.8	4	171	16.68	0	103
Duration* (months)	–	–	–	37.68	2	132	17.92	1	36	48.36	12	96

* Duration is in months

Those individuals with stronger community ties but who remained low on consumption activity were labeled *weekend warriors*. They participate regularly in the online community, but they have little need to consume subcultural capital except on special occasions, such as socializing on the weekend or when attending sporadic meetups and conventions (i.e., Comicon or Steamcon). Weekend warriors frequently post photos of themselves in costume, but have little to add to discussion aside from posts about the development of their alter-ego.

Online participants with relatively weak community ties and high consumption activity were labeled *peddlers*. They are so involved in the subculture that they are also on the forums/sites peddling their own goods that are associated with the subculture. Peddlers are characterized by relatively infrequent postings compared to weekend warriors and the next group. They are very knowledgeable about the community, but somewhat opportunistic and self-serving by using the website as a platform for self-promotion of their music, custom clothing, or other modded subcultural paraphernalia.
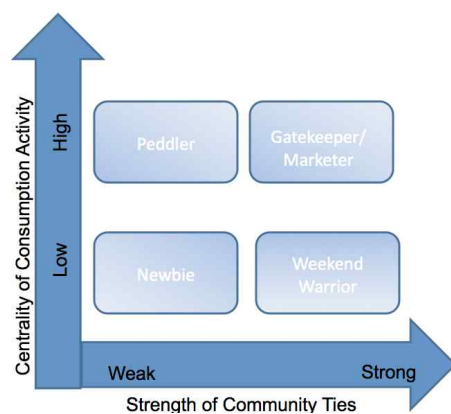
Figure 2.
Conceptual Model

Adapted from Misra, Mukherjee, & Peterson (2008)

The last category was labeled *gatekeepers/marketers* because of their high investment in the day-to-day activities of the online community and they also have high consumption activity, possibly wearing subcultural dress on a daily basis. Gatekeepers are on the forums primarily as eWOM spokespeople, whose product opinions are considered trusted sources. They often have a great deal of knowledge on appropriate websites to refer the inquiring *newbie* and *weekend warrior* when asked about where to buy the latest music and accoutrements. The *gatekeepers/marketers* are also the sages who disseminate the history of the subculture through regular, instructive postings. They maintain the rules and values of the collective by clearly establishing and protecting subcultural boundaries through sanctioning mechanisms.

Conclusions and Implications

Both Steampunk and Dieselpunk present fixations on nostalgia for periods outside of the individual members' living memories, which is a dominating feature of their consumption experiences (Strubel, in press). Steampunk and Dieselpunk do not represent who the individual is, but rather a persona of who they could have been in another lifetime, a fantasy alter-ego. Dress is central to the process of self-shaping, and the fantasy self becomes an essential part of the Steampunk and Dieselpunk identity. Out of a desire to temporarily disconnect with contemporary society, Steampunks and Dieselpunks use dress and subcultural participation as a form of escape. As can be inferred from the online discussion, their generic style preserves elements of DIY, but it is mostly in the form of "modding" contemporary goods to make them look antique. This has helped to popularize the purchase of home-made goods from the craft network, Etsy (Strubel, in press). Other discussions in forums talk about their lack of concern with labels. They don't wear the "usual", mainstream brands. They like to keep style original and experiment with looks**.** Steampunks and Dieselpunks believe that clothing creates the persona. A persona is not part of the true identity, but rather a separately created identity that acts as an extension of the true identity. Steampunks and Dieselpunks often choose a persona with a personal history and then build a wardrobe around that persona.

The Gothic aesthetic is usually consistent from place to place, allowing members to use clothing for identifying each other. Dress is a very important aspect of the Gothic subculture because it symbolizes status and belonging. It is not only used as a strategy for identification, but also a means of gaining the respect of other Goths. Goths commonly view themselves as strongly committed to their Gothic lifestyle, which they perceive to be superior to mainstream culture. This is exhibited in their dislike of commercialism and the mass media (Hodkinson, 2002). Because of a devotion to their creative lifestyles and the importance of shopping, specialty Goth stores have become a key element to the Goth scene. However, this subculture, which once frowned on inauthenticity, now suggests mainstream retail stores to clothe its members in discussion boards. There is a strict classification system in the Gothic subculture and a widespread 'Gother than thou' syndrome causing the members to constantly compare themselves to each other to see who more approximates the Gothic ideal. Many claim not to have a 'style', but then they label themselves in forum discussions as one of the several subgenres of Goth, such as

RomantiGoths, Pastel Goths, or Vampire Goths. Labels are clearly important and those labels come with distinct sartorial styles.

Nihilism was the principal ideology of the original Punk subculture in the 1970s because it expressed young people's disgust with the middle class and the complacency of the times. Punk music, like the clothing, was subject to the DIY approach, and it was particularly simplistic in structure. DIY style or music today is rare because it interferes with catering to the youth market. Rather, garments are pre-fabricated and designer-labeled, going counter to the original Punk DIY aesthetic.

Academic implications

This article has shown a new approach to classifying subcultural consumers based on their patterns of behavior in discussion boards in online communities, and their observed consumption patterns of subcultural capital that is used to articulate their subcultural identities. The consumption of commodities, such as music and clothing, is central to the construction and declaration of one's identity. For subculturalists, online communities are a means to easily access, or even, create alternative forms of their subcultures.

Retailer Implications

Dress and music commodities clearly remain very important to these subcultures, and there have been demonstrable shifts to online participation by subculturalists when making pre-purchase and post-purchase decisions. This is an opportunity for retailers to gain insight into what subcultural consumer's needs and wants are at the information gathering stage of the decision-making process.

Additionally, there is also a distinct trend towards digitizing music and videos, and most people want to purchase subcultural capital online. Thus, music artists can utilize these online forums to market themselves directly to their supporters. They can target specific online communities with subcultural ties to their musical genres, or communities can act as unofficial promotional platforms through eWOM.

Per discussion postings, brand image appears to be of no importance to subculturalists. The uniqueness of a product that is tailored to the aesthetic needs of its respective subculture has more social value attached and will bestow more prestige and social recognition to the owner than branded items. Quality, well- bondage pants are more important to any self-respecting Goth than the label found inside. Many retailers are taking the shopping experience to the next level by allowing customers to individually design almost anything. This could prove beneficial for subcultures that have hard-to-find products that need to be customized, such as the Victorian-era corsets worn by Steampunk women. When people have some control over product creation, they feel more confident in their choices and this can help to create brand loyalty, not for the associated image but for the extrinsic factors (i.e., price, fit, quality) (Lohr, 2012).

Finally, retailers can also use the classification system to reach out to subcultural leaders (the gatekeepers) for marketing purposes. Because of their position in the subcultural hierarchy and their high lev-

els of involvement with products, they act as opinion leaders and can help influence the purchase behavior of others. It is speculated that e-retail will account for 9% of total retail sales in 2016 (up from 7% in 2012) (Rueter, 2012), therefore it is important to divide the market into meaningful and measurable segments according to customer's needs, their past behaviors or their demographic profiles. Consumer segmentation allows a company to fit its product offerings to those segments that are the most profitable, thereby giving the company a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Consumer segmentation can also help companies to create customized marketing campaigns and implement pricing strategies that secure maximum profit potential from consumers of all price sensitivities.

Crowdsourcing, originally developed to outsource scientific R&D projects, has gained in popularity as a new format for branding and design. Retailers could possibly source talent from the peddlers who hawk their own goods to online communities instead of losing that potential revenue to craft networks.

The data collected in phase two of this study show that there is a great deal more to learn about the consumption patterns of growing online communities, especially because there has been a cultural shift in many communities where they no longer focus on the youth segment nor face-to-face interaction as signs of authenticity and lifestyle commitment (i.e., Steampunk and Dieselpunk). By investigating the relationships between the number of online friends that members have, the postings that they make, and types of sites that they belong to, we can learn how to infiltrate and possibly better serve these niche markets from a retail perspective.

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