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## Europeans in-Between

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# Trans-moving generations. Who are the global hipsters?

*Plamena Slavcheva*

## 1 Introduction

While the study of subcultures is not new in the field of sociology, cultural studies and urban anthropology, less attention has been devoted to the subject placed in the current context of increasingly blurred physical and social boundaries between cultures. In other words, previous theories (Cohen 1972, Hebdige 1979, Hall and Jefferson 1993) related to the subject can no longer be limited to certain geographical spaces and need to be adapted to the actual political, social and cultural reality, in which the information explosion and the integration of new technologies have led to an environment of extreme interconnectedness, making accessible endless amounts of knowledge of other cultures via online search tools and social networks. It should be considered, then, that “many previous assumptions about the social and physical boundaries that define cultures may no longer apply.”<sup>1</sup>

To observe that closely, this paper will study hipsters as a contemporary subculture whose popularization on a global level has been made possible, to a great extent, by online media and globalized consumerism. And here the notion of subculture is borrowed from the cultural theorist Dick Hebdige: “The challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed (and, as we shall see, ‘magically resolved’) at the profoundly superficial level

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<sup>1</sup> L. Alfrey, “The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective.” (MA Thesis, Georgetown University, 2010), 2.

of appearances: that is, at the level of signs.”<sup>2</sup> Departing from Hebdige’s definition, this paper will focus on defining the notion of a subculture, placed in the contemporary context of increasingly blurred boundaries between cultures, where common expressions of taste and style are seen as a way to establish behavior connections beyond national borders.

My hypothesis is that it is necessary to re-conceptualize previous (sub)cultural theories as cultural subgroups are no longer strictly territory-bounded – we can no longer talk about British punks or German rappers. Instead, as Figure 1 shows, the emergence of hipsters globally demonstrates that subcultures today should be studied in relation to consumerism, new communication technologies and identity formation in a global era. Thus, the guiding principle of this research paper is to modify the terrain for investigating subcultures and thereby produce new configurations for re-thinking identity formation in our contemporary world. “We need some critical relation to the processes that are currently forming us and from which we cannot escape, but which we need to understand in order to act within them as social agents....”<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Identity, globality and virtuality

Today, more people seem to be on the move and the expansion of trans-border relations, tourism and student exchange has been intensified due to the economic dynamics of globalization which have created more complex patterns of cultural diversity.<sup>4</sup> This basically means that the experience of combining the global and the

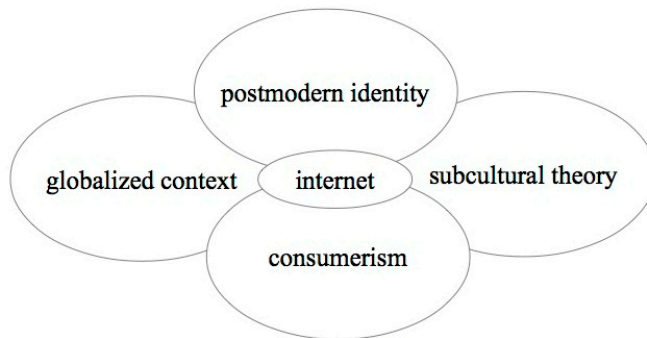


Figure 1

<sup>2</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of style* (New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1967), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Robins, *Challenge of Transcultural Diversities Cultural Policy And Cultural Diversity* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2006), 169.

local facilitates cross-cultural exchange of information, which helps people to overcome the state of being “prisoners of borders.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Mikhail Epstein differentiates between migrants who in spite of leaving their geographical location remain imprisoned in their language and traditions, other migrants who become “prisoners” of a newly-adopted culture and “transculturalists” who have found a way to free themselves from the constraints of their own original culture and have explored, examined and infiltrated other “alien” cultures.<sup>6</sup> In spite of that, it is not very safe here to defend such an extreme and totalizing vision of freedom, escape and imprisoning cultures since none of these notions have a standardized meaning and differ in value for each individual – what is liberating for some could be restraining for others. However, it is still important to look at the shift of cultural configurations providing space for new kinds of cultural encounters and exchange. In this sense, travel writer Iyer Pico successfully describes how such global transformations are also felt at a local level by documenting a typical day in a highly interconnected world:

I wake up to the sound of my Japanese clock radio, put on a T-shirt sent me by an uncle in Nigeria and walk onto the street, past German cars, to my office. Around me are English-language students from Korea, Switzerland and Argentina — all on this Spanish-named road in this Mediterranean style town. On TV, I find the news is in Mandarin; today’s baseball game is being broadcast in Korean. For lunch I can walk to a sushi bar, a tandoori palace, a Thai café, or the newest burrito joint (run by an old Japanese lady). Who am I, I sometimes wonder... and where am I? I am, as it happens, in Southern California, in a quiet, relatively uninternational town, but I could as easily be in Vancouver or Sydney or London or Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose here is not to highlight the positive aspects of globalization, but to consider the shift from solid, defined, localized, territorialized, nation-bound modernity to postmodernity, or what Zygmunt Bauman calls “liquidity”, meaning that it is redefined by the effects of globalization, migration, nomadism, tourism, social networks, and huge and fascinating potentials of new technologies and information systems.<sup>8</sup>

These developments raise the question of the postmodern identity and the way it is being constructed in a new intermingled global context, which also demands an anti-essentialist redefinition of ethnic, racial and national conceptions of cultural identity. On the other hand, the loosening of ties to a particular social and

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of “prisoner of borders” is borrowed from the IP Paper Guide 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Epstein, “Transculture: A Broad Way between Globalism and Multiculturalism,” *American Journal of Economics & Sociology* 68, no.1 (2009): 330.

<sup>7</sup> Pico Iyer, “The Global Village Finally Arrives,” *Time Magazine*, 2 December 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 13.

cultural structure stimulates diverse forms of self-expression, which are basically aiming at the distinction between what we are by birth and what we are by choice.<sup>9</sup> However, distinction is frequently manifested through the consumption of products, which are associated with an aspired socioeconomic status.

Whether face-to-face or online, much of what people want to know about other people is not directly observable. We rely instead on signals, which are perceivable features and actions that indicate the presence or absence of those hidden qualities. We cannot directly observe others' beliefs, experiences, or what they really think of us; instead we rely on signals such as facial expressions, consumption patterns, or the statements they make on their profiles in order to infer these qualities.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, the patterns of identity signaling are largely influenced by social changes brought by online media (such as blogs, social networks, chats, etc.), shaping mainly the way how people today establish contact, interaction and exchange of resources.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this scenario could alter social behavior since "one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioral styles and patterns" and identity becomes a name given to a "material entity."<sup>12</sup> Boundaries of time and space are progressively blurred creating in this way opportunities and challenges for old and new forms of social ties and communities. Real and virtual communities generated by shared experience have become a place where people find others who share their interests and values. But virtual geographies have to do with new senses of place and location and can challenge the way we perceive distances and the relation between us and others. Thus, the social interaction between people is being transformed by progressively shifting from the physical to the virtual.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Slimbach, "The Transcultural Journey," *Frontiers: the Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 11 (2005): 205.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Donath, "Signals in Social Supernetts," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2007): 233

<sup>11</sup> Barry Wellman et al., "The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 8, no.3 (2003), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol8/issue3/wellman.html> (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity." in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 19.

### 3 The transformation of hipsters throughout the years

In order to find the answers of the research question raised by this paper, one should first understand who hipsters are, where they came from and what the aesthetics of contemporary hipsters are. With this aim, the following section will contextualize when and where the hipster appeared first and to what extent the term transformed throughout the years.

First of all, the meaning of “hip” is rather abstract and the associations it provokes are organized around the avant-garde and countercultural: “Hip has never been about hippies, nor majorities and fashions... It is sometimes present in the pool shark and almost always absent in the pop star, here and not there, and its subtle signs and signals are infinitely reverberating....”<sup>13</sup> Such an abstract description already suggests a certain process of hybridization and stresses that what is in-between cultural forms is central to the creation of new cultural meaning: “Born in the dance between black and white, hip thrives on juxtaposition and pastiche, it connects the disparate and contradictory.”<sup>14</sup> An effort to popularize the new subculture was made by Jack Kerouac who in his novel *On The Road* (1957) described the hipster as a wanderer inspired by the Beat Generation, an existentialist influenced by jazz, poetry, recreational drugs and spiritual lifestyles. Twenty years after Kerouac’s novel, Dick Hebdige (1979) challenged this portrayal, referring to the hipster instead as a “radical, white intellectual” who appropriated elements of black culture’s dress, language and music for his own novelty.<sup>15</sup> The appeal of the hipster, argued Hebdige, was a lifestyle offering whites a perceived “freedom-in-bondage” from the expectations of middle and upper class life.<sup>16</sup>

The term hipster was predominantly used as a reference to bohemianism which played a key role in the development of the subculture. The two essential elements of bohemianism identified by Albert Parry are a love of art and an idealization of poverty: “I like to think of my Bohemians as young, as radical in their outlook on art and life; as unconventional, and, though this is debatable, as dwellers in a city large enough to have the somewhat cruel atmosphere of all great cities.”<sup>17</sup> Over the years, the concept of who hipsters are has crystallized into the general consideration that those belonging to the hipster subculture are most commonly middle or upper class leftists, guided by artistic sentiments, “eager to shun class expectations through voluntary poverty.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Fred Dellar et al., *The Hip Hipsters, Jazz and the Beat Generation* (London: Faber & Faber London, 1986), 1.

<sup>14</sup> John Leland, *Hip: The History* (Harper Collins: New York, 2004), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of style*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Poet George Sterling quoted in Albert Parry, *Garrett & pretenders: A history of bohemianism in America* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2005), 238.

<sup>18</sup> Alfrey, *The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective*, 28.

The meaning assigned to hipsters is still under construction and has suffered various transformations throughout the twentieth century. It is relevant for the purpose of this paper to study the points of analogy and distinction between a hipster from the 70s and a hipster from the 90s. When referring to hipsters after 1999, the sociologist Richard Lloyd uses the term “neo-bohemia” and describes them as aspiring artists, who after having day jobs in bars and cafes became members of a new class of rich young people working in the field of design, marketing, and web development.<sup>19</sup> This argument is further expanded by Mark Greif who looks at it from a more critical perspective by claiming that “in the hipster culture the people aren't necessarily producing art; they're actually working in advertising, marketing and product placement. [...] Now it's meaningful in this world to say that you sell sneakers, at a high level. Instead of doing art the cool kids are now doing products.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, such a statement explicitly refers to the strong attachment of hipsters to consumerism in times when the idea of hip and cool makes sense only when dressing in certain brands and labels.<sup>21</sup> While the contemporary hipster may have emerged from Williamsburg (New York), today hipsters are a worldwide phenomenon, which means that they are no longer confined to any specific location. Nowadays, the hipster culture is widely extended from Copenhagen to Cape Town, from Tokyo to Sao Paulo, from Berlin to Brooklyn, from Istanbul to Sofia and all its members wear the same clothes and accessories, listen to the same music, ride the same bicycles and read the same magazines and style blogs. The style anthropologist Ted Polhemus similarly reflects on the issue by pointing out that trends are more and more globally accessible:

There always used to be a particular city that was the centre of cool at a particular point in time, but now there's no longer a place where it's 'at'; there's no longer any centre of the world's popular cultural universe. For a time it seemed it would be a simple matter of shifting from London to Tokyo. But instead, street style is everywhere and in places you'd never have guessed it would be.<sup>22</sup>

The trends with which hipsters associate are constantly changing and because of this reason their definition is likewise in a constant state of flux. Hipsters are generally a young, multi-ethnic group, often reflecting the cultural diversity of their city. They rarely define themselves as hipsters and thus remain elusive in terms of providing a self-definition: “An integral part of being a hipster is a denial of hip-

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Alex Rayner, "Why do people hate hipsters?," *Guardian*, 14 October 2010, Fashion Section.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 231.

<sup>22</sup> “Meet the global scenesters: hip, cool and everywhere,” *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 August 2008, Fashion & Beauty section.

sterism. The people who most frequently use the word hipster are often accused of being hipsters themselves.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast to an explicit self-definition, one can rather identify them as hipsters due to specific cultural practices like alternative music, philosophy, independent film, liberal political views, vintage clothing and environmental consciousness.

No matter how “liquid” the definition of their identity is, there is a characteristic that is common for hipsters – the relation to consumption. Hipsters, within this framework, act as “rebel consumers,” a cultural type identified in the nineties by the social critic Thomas Frank (1997). Rebel consumers are the people who “adopting the rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture” convince themselves of being subversive because of buying the right products.<sup>24</sup> Hipsters are not interested in inventing means of differentiation to challenge norms of the common culture by criticizing or confronting dominant values, they only achieve distinction through the act of consuming brands.<sup>25</sup> Hipsters are therefore rebels whose cause is based on a pseudo-rebellion – they might refuse to conform to the socially accepted patterns of behavior but this attitude is only expressed through the language of consumer culture. This behavior is even reflected in certain advertisements, created to target hipsters.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4 What can we learn from hipsters about ourselves?

Although hipsters do not organize their activities around a particular cause or political objective, but rather, as previously explained, through expressions of taste, one may argue that such criticism applies to other subcultures as well. It is precisely the outer appearance of people that shapes one of our first impressions and is certainly what enables us to identify or categorize people as members of a certain subgroup. This means specifically that for a person to be called a hippie, it is enough that he or she wears a tie-dye shirt and not necessarily that this person is against the Vietnam War.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, it is hard to believe that anyone gets automatically admitted into a hippie movement on account of his liberal political views without applying the necessary “dress code.” Thus, it is even questionable if

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<sup>23</sup> Brennan Writing, “Postmodern Identity in the Hipster Mind,” Tola Brennan Website, <http://www.tolabrennan.com/home/2009/05/postmodern-identity-in-the-hipster-mind/> (accessed 4 May 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Greif, “Who was the hipster?”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> YouTube, “How much hipster can you pack in a Jazz?” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5dIzY7yvRA> (accessed 12 May 2010).

<sup>27</sup> “Deconstructing the Hipster and Youth Culture Movements: Just another youth movement or a revolutionary departure?” Market Wisdom, <http://www.mktwisdom.com/articles/76/deconstructing-the-hipster-and-youth-culture-movements> (accessed 6 May 2011).



any countercultural forms can exist and be authentic “without being transformed into self-annihilating simulations of themselves for mass consumption.”<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the problem of authenticity, an important issue to consider is the transition from modernity to postmodernity. According to Zygmunt Bauman, the modern problem of identity is grounded in the idea that identity should be kept solid and stable, while the postmodern problem of identity accepts liquidity and avoids fixation: “In the case of identity, as in other cases, the catchword of modernity was creation; the catchword of postmodernity is recycling.”<sup>29</sup> Hipsters relate to that in the sense that the subculture has appeared as a result of a process of recycling, based on borrowing elements from previous trends, as well as uniting diverse cultures into one in order to create an individuality to identify with. For this reason, the hipster culture is described as “a succession of styles from the past half-century, patched together to form a single, strangely familiar whole...there's a bit of Eurotrash here, some British punk there, a swatch of Asian minimalism, and a sizeable off-cut of blue-collar chic from both sides of the Atlantic.”<sup>30</sup>

While shifting in transgressive expression, from hippie to punk, from beat to grunge and gothic, the notion of the term hipster has remained through each decade. The fact that hipsters borrow elements from other cultures and styles exemplifies Welsch's transcultural theory that “for every culture, all other cultures have tendentially come to be inner-content or satellites.”<sup>31</sup> But others see this characteristic as problematic and refer to hipsters as the ones who marked the “dead end of Western civilization” – “a culture lost in the superficiality of its past and unable to create any new meaning.”<sup>32</sup> One should point out here that the “mass marketing of nostalgia” through vintage fashions, retro furniture and the spread of memory practices in visual arts, among others, are common tendencies in our contemporary world.<sup>33</sup> Though consumerism and the materialization of the past in the present are undoubtedly making up the bulk of a hipster society, these are also collectively shared practices.

These findings can be further explained with the issue of identity and its meaning in a postmodern era. As Christopher Lasch points out, the meaning of identity “refers to both persons and to things, which have lost their solidity in modern society, their definiteness and continuity.”<sup>34</sup> All products are designed now with a programmed obsolescence in order to intensify consumerism.<sup>35</sup> Identities, in

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, Elizabeth. “The Bohemianization of Mass Culture.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (1999): 11.

<sup>29</sup> Bauman, *From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity*, 18-36.

<sup>30</sup> Belfast Telegraph, “Meet the global scenesters: hip, cool and everywhere.”

<sup>31</sup> Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality: The Changing Form of Cultures Today,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 22, no.2 (2001): 61.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas Haddow, “Hipster. The Dead End of Western Civilization,” *AdBusters*, 29 July 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (London: Pan Books, 1984), 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

the same way, “can be adopted and discarded like a change of costume.”<sup>36</sup> Such a statement connects explicitly with the problem of defining hipsters due to their constantly “changing costumes.” On the one hand, hipster identity resists classification as an homogeneous group, as it is present at a global level, and on the other hand, hipster trends avoid fixation and thus the definition of a hipster remains in a constant process of construction. The way this mechanism functions seems to be very much related to Oscar Wilde’s vision that “fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.” In this context of rapidly changing trends one needs to take into consideration another aspect that distinguishes our times quite clearly from earlier decades, namely the popularity of sub-cultural style due to online dissemination, making group boundaries highly permeable and increasing opportunities for participation and imitation. As Martin Raymond, co-founder of the trend forecasting company “The Future Laboratory,” explains:

Trends aren't transmitted hierarchically, as they used to be [...]. You once had a series of gatekeepers in the adoption of a trend: the innovator, the early adopter, the late adopter, the early mainstream, the late mainstream, and finally the conservative. But now it goes straight from the innovator to the mainstream.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, the uniqueness pretended by hipsters could be questioned, as it is difficult to separate subculture from the masses when the boundaries between both are progressively blurred. Furthermore, hipsters have reached global popularity and have become “millions strong” which makes it even more difficult to distinguish them.<sup>38</sup> However, the complication of establishing a unified definition of a hipster seems to be an important concern for different authors.<sup>39</sup> This can be explained with the assumption that the investigation of who hipsters are goes beyond their mere description and drives one’s attention to the meaning of subculture in today’s global era. According to Mark Greif, “the really meaningful and unexplained sub-culture phenomenon of our time is the hipster.”<sup>40</sup> A big part of Greif’s sociological study “What was the hipster?” is not only trying to historicize the transformation of the hipster but also to reflect on the moment we live in, on ourselves: “The hipster [...] keeps us moving forward into new fashions, [...] consuming more 'creatively' and discovering new things that haven't become lame and hipster. We keep consuming more, and more cravenly, yet this always seems to us to be the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>37</sup> Belfast Telegraph, “Meet the global scenesters: hip, cool and everywhere.”

<sup>38</sup> Alfrey, *The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> “What was the hipster?” *n+1*, 4 November 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Emelie Rawlings Sundun, “What Was the Hipster: An Interview with Mark Greif,” *The Harvard Voice*, 19 November 2010.

hipster's fault, not our own.”<sup>41</sup> For this reason, this paper concludes that the study of hipsters as an emerging global phenomenon could also teach us something more about the contemporary world where factors such as globalized consumerism influence people's behavior.

## 5 Hipsters go global

The following section will focus on hipsters as global actors and will look into the possible factors facilitating a global hipster identity. As a point of departure of this analysis, one should remember that the landscape for identity signaling has changed and thus the notion of subculture has been simultaneously altered. Online media such as blogs and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc.) not only shift social interaction from the physical to the virtual space, but also complicate the landscape for identity formation. In turn, virtual space offers new possibilities for the negotiation and construction of identity and especially for the creation of imagined worlds and imagined selves.

With the growing interconnectedness of people, and the increasing expression of culture through global commodities, signaling no longer happens at the level of race, class or gender. Signaling now occurs via online social networks. Online spaces invite new opportunities for signaling and surveillance across geographic and social boundaries, leading to the formation of groups that undermine previous theories of subcultures.<sup>42</sup>

This new dynamism of cultural creation and individualization helps to decrease the importance of cultural differences and most importantly reflects the emergence of “globalized, borderless cultures,” defined by the culture of information society.<sup>43</sup> This notion basically refers to the de-territorialization of cultural content due to new communication technologies. Today, the globally accessed virtual space for sharing and exchanging knowledge and creativity promotes a process of development of individual versions of culture through contacts with others. The paradox, however, is that borderless cultures cannot avoid producing new borders, which are different from the traditional ones and are reflected in the creation of new kinds of (sub)cultural expression through music, fashion trends and arts. Moreover, in spite of the above-mentioned individuation, the formation of these new

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<sup>41</sup> Rayner, “Why do people hate hipsters?”

<sup>42</sup> Alfrey, *The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Nada Švob-Đokić, “New Borders and the Borderless Cultures,” in *Dynamics of Communication: New Ways and New Actors*, in *Dynamics of Communication: New Ways and New Actors*, ed. Biserka Cvjetičanin (Zagreb: Institute for International Relations, 2006), 8.

cultural “tribes” leads to the homogenization of cultures rather than their diversification. In this sense, the relation between the local and the global is actually contributing to first de-constructing cultural identities and then re-constructing them into hipsters, hackers, rockers and other contemporary forms of subcultures.

### 5.1 Expressions of taste and signaling theory

The concepts of taste expression and identity signaling are essential for moving forward towards the re-conceptualization of hipsters as a contemporary global subculture formation. The notion of taste refers to the systematic classification of individuals as more or less desirable, acceptable or valuable, just like consumer goods.<sup>44</sup> More precisely, individuals can “converge together” because of similarities in the status or group affiliation they communicate through displays of consumption.<sup>45</sup> A hipster is, therefore, “only made visible through performative consumption, where expressions of taste via clothing, music, and activities, evince aspirational categories of identity.”<sup>46</sup> Dick Hebdige is one of the first scholars who in *Subcultures and the Meaning of Style* (1979) pays attention to the function of clothing as a way to express “normality or deviance,” considering that “common style has a relative invisibility.”<sup>47</sup> According to Hebdige, subcultural style is unique, it is “a visible construction and it directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read.”<sup>48</sup> The selection of clothing can then act in two ways: to signal affiliation to a certain social group or convergence from other groups.<sup>49</sup> While taste expression refers to the construction of meaning through outer appearances, identity signaling is studied in relation to market interactions and consumer behavior.<sup>50</sup>

In the field of social sciences, signaling theory is used to investigate ways of communicating and negotiating social status.<sup>51</sup> The objects we attach to can transport information and simultaneously symbolize our “human qualities” or social status.<sup>52</sup> For example, one may intuit that someone is a hipster if he or she wears skinny jeans, old-school sneakers, plaid shirt and vintage glasses. The signalling

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<sup>44</sup> Sharon Zukin and Jennifer Smith Maguire, “Consumers and consumption,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004):178.

<sup>45</sup> Jonah Berger and Chip Heath, “Who Drives Divergence? Identity- Signaling, Out-group Dissimilarity, and the Abandonment of Cultural Tastes,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95 (2008): 123.

<sup>46</sup> Alfrey, *The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective*, 34-36.

<sup>47</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Alfrey, *The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Spence, *Market signaling: Informational transfer in hiring and related screening processes*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>51</sup> Donath, *Signals in Social Supernets*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

theory is applicable for the study of hipsters, as it explains how they manage to maintain a cohesive identity via websites, blogs, music labels, etc. In this way, for example, a trend pictured in Istanbul and uploaded on a photo-sharing blog can immediately find more followers in Krakow or Amsterdam. As Maria Bustillos writes,

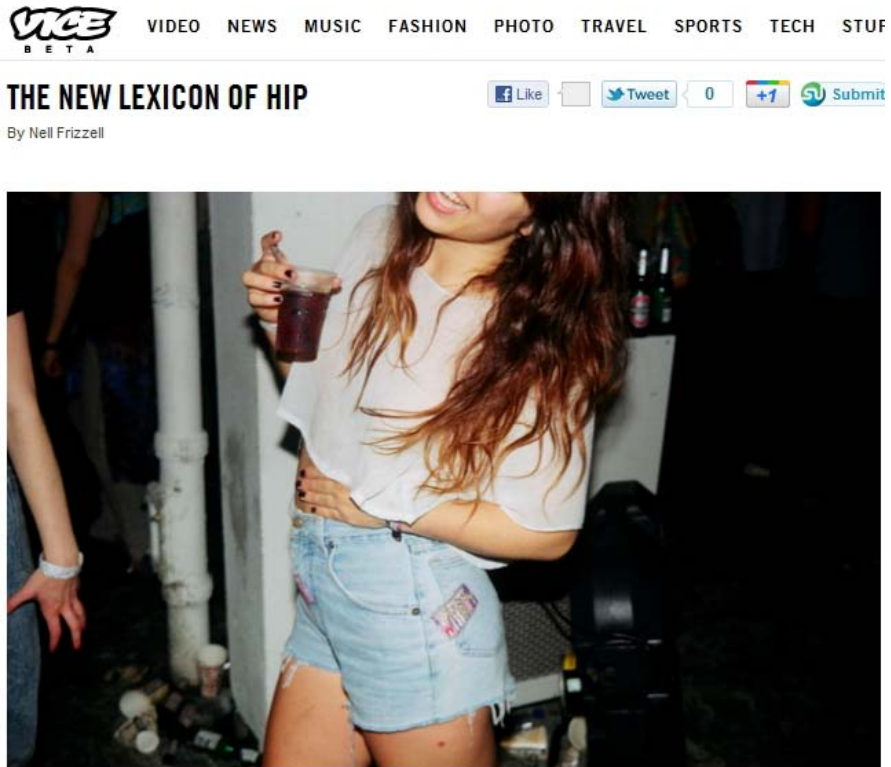
the tastes and habits of the world's hipsters are real symbols of a certain way of life and way of thinking; there's fidelity to a certain truth in the underlying reality, and that is how a Tokyo hipster can quickly recognize what might prove to be a kindred spirit in Buenos Aires or Austin...In the age of the Internet, though, that symbolic force has become just hugely magnified, because new symbols can penetrate the hive mind so quickly, and so deeply.<sup>53</sup>

Within this cultural pluralism, symbols help hipsters recognize each other despite their personal differences. In order to explain how a subgroup manages to persist on a global level, the following section will look into the role of online media in creating and disseminating the hipster aesthetic.

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<sup>53</sup> Maria Bustillos, "Being a Hipster Is an Excellent and Wonderful Thing!" *The Owl*, 20 October 2010.

## 5.2 The role of online media



A couple of nights ago a lot of hipsters on Twitter retweeted someone's assertion that they were "So sick of the word 'hipster'. Seems like it's been ten years of endless articles sneering at young people interested in music, art, fashion, fun etc. as 'hipsters', like that's some sort of strange crime against society."

Figure 2. Snapshot of *Vice Magazine*,  
<http://www.vice.com/read/the-new-lexicon-of-hip> (accessed 20 October 2011).

Current publications such as *Vice Magazine*, referred to as the "hipster's bible,"<sup>54</sup> and the blog *Lookbook*, which self-defines as "the internet's largest source of fashion inspiration from real people around the world,"<sup>55</sup> are among the great number of websites commercializing the hipster aesthetics by promoting particular music, art and fashion. *Vice Magazine*, for example, is perceived as the "major actor in the

<sup>54</sup> Ian Burrell, "Substance over style: Hipster's bible Vice magazine is making documentaries about war zones," *The Independent*, 21 October 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Lookbook, <http://lookbook.nu/> (accessed 10 May 2011)

early hipster movement, credited with helping to invent the hipster aesthetic.”<sup>56</sup> It is a free monthly fashion magazine, distributed in multiple languages to thirty one countries, which allows its audience to take part in the process of content creation by sending pictures or news stories of interest.

For the editor of the magazine Andy Capper the *Vice* philosophy is summarized as follows: “The culture we want to encourage is: go and buy a camera, and travel to a place that nobody has ever been before, point that camera and come back and show us what you've seen.”<sup>57</sup> Through this type of interaction the magazine not only tries to establish new patterns of behavior, but also allows users to provide readers with their stories and ideas, which once published online, can also function as the “cultural capital” that manifests hipster status.”<sup>58</sup>

Another website which promotes hipster trends is the user-generated fashion blog *Lookbook*, which by letting readers upload photos of street trends or trendy-looking people, encourages the audience to vote, “facebook like”, “tweet”, or comment on each look. Unsurprisingly, the blog communicates predominantly through photo-sharing as if referring to the old saying that images are a lot worthier than words. Thus, *Lookbook* connects hipsters from the wider world by providing space where “a global hipster can disseminate a local style worldwide before sunrise.”<sup>59</sup> One may conclude, therefore, that these sites act as “social bridges” that have the potential to “sew networks together.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, for a subculture to persist on a global level, it is highly relevant to link its geographically dispersed members, maintaining a sort of a virtual cosmopolitanism, which allows a hipster in Berlin to be aware of the hipster trends in Sao Paulo, for example. As a result, the creation of new spaces for socio-cultural interaction and their successful exploration reflects one’s desire to belong to something. Indeed, knowingly or not, the participation in social groupings is part of one’s everyday life:

These [...] little masses (popularized as neotribes) are fundamental to our experience of life in general [...] the consumption of cultural resources circulated through markets (brands, leisure experiences, and so on) are not the *sine qua non* of contemporary life, rather, they facilitate what are meaningful social relationships.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Haddow, “Hipster. The Dead End of Western Civilization.”

<sup>57</sup> Burrell, “Substance over style: Hipster's bible Vice magazine is making documentaries about war zones.”

<sup>58</sup> Alfrey, *The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective*, 37.

<sup>59</sup> Belfast Telegraph, “Meet the global scenesters.”

<sup>60</sup> Mark Buchanan, *Nexus: Small worlds and the groundbreaking theory of networks* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002), 48.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Cova et al., *Consumer Tribes* (UK: Elsevier Linacre House, 2007), 5.



Figure 3. Images captured on Lookbook, [www.lookbook.nu](http://www.lookbook.nu) (accessed 20 October 2011).

What remains to be seen in the future is how media contributes to the construction of hipster identity by producing an extensive media analysis of a previously selected number of blogs and newspaper articles that deal with the topic. This method could be highly useful for investigating whether the proliferation of hipster-related content online could be also seen as an advertising strategy for promoting certain brands and targeting hipster wannabes.

One should highlight that apart from providing space that brings hipsters together, online media generates standards that guide the reader's consumption choices – images representing the latest fashion and music trends undoubtedly foster consumerism.<sup>62</sup> The notion of standard, in this case, refers to “rules, norms, meaning and identity over time based on ongoing interactions and negotiations that accompany participation in a shared enterprise.”<sup>63</sup> Beside a subculture, hipsters also constitute a global network, in which people from different parts of the world are invited to collaborate in negotiating standards of hipsterism. The act of creating standards is then essential for the emergence of communities and their further global expansion as “they constitute an agreed upon set of meanings, scripts, and rules that guide behavior and govern relationships.”<sup>64</sup>

This argument could be further developed by applying the understanding of culture as not belonging to people and places, but defined by the standards that

<sup>62</sup> Alfrey, *The Search for Authenticity: How Hipsters Transformed from a Local Subculture to a Global Consumption Collective*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Linda Garcia and Kelsey Burns, “Globalization, Developing Countries, and the Evolution of International Standard Setting Communities of Practice” (paper presented to China’s Technology Standards Policy Workshop, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, 6 January 2005), 1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



people adopt for their daily interaction.<sup>65</sup> If culture is not bounded by territory anymore, people could be considered as the main “carriers, consumers, and inventors of a culture.”<sup>66</sup> Harry Wolcott describes the process of development of individual versions of culture through contacts with others, with whom one may not share the same set of standards but may acquire some new ones.<sup>67</sup> The point here is that instead of subordinating individuals to social and cultural integration, cultural practices are seen as “the capacity to construct one’s own personal, coherent, and meaningful experience.”<sup>68</sup> This means that the national cultural agenda is still present, but a new “transcultural frame” has settled over it, which demands the re-definition of (sub)cultures.<sup>69</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

While the study of the role of interpenetrating digital networks in society is nothing new, it is important to pay attention to their power to stimulate the expansion of communities or what in the context of this paper was called – “a global hipster identity.” Blogs and social networks are some of the means which provide more possibilities for interaction and successful communication beyond borders. The main reason why geographically dispersed hipsters manage to “cohere around the same interests” is that virtual spaces facilitate exchange of and access to transnational cultural content.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the weakening of social roles and attachment to nation-bounded territory pushes individuals to look for affiliation with other social groups with which to identify.<sup>71</sup> Such a socio-cultural climate is precisely what has led to the emergence of the contemporary hipster and a great number of followers globally.

The study of hipsters illustrates not only how the phenomenon emerged as a global trend, but also makes us reflect on the construction and definition of identity, which far from remaining static “becomes a freely chosen game and a theatrical presentation of the self.”<sup>72</sup> One of the main problems when investigating hip-

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<sup>65</sup> Frederick Erickson, “Culture in society and in educational practice,” in *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*, ed. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 47.

<sup>66</sup> Heewon Chang, “Re-examining the Rhetoric of the “Cultural Border,” *Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education* 1(1), 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Harry Wolcott, “Propriospect and the acquisition of culture,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 22, no.3 (1991), 263.

<sup>68</sup> Alain Touraine, “Culture without society,” *Cultural Values* 2 (1998): 155.

<sup>69</sup> Robins, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Barry Wellman et al., “The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism,” *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, no. 8 (2003), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol8/issue3/wellman.html> (accessed 12 May 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Robert Weiner, *Creativity and beyond: Cultures, values, and change* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 112.

<sup>72</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Popular culture and constructing postmodern identities,” in *Modernity and Identity*, ed. Scott Lasch and Jonathan Friedman (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1992), 156.

sters arises when this presentation of the self is guided by constantly changing trends. It turns out that hipster identity is only distinguishable in terms of appearance, which changes its looks with the same frequency as do fashion magazines and blog updates. Hipsters exemplify, in this way, how expressions of taste and consumer patterns are the main tools for signaling status and distinction from undesired social groups.

However, the social logic of taste is not a recent discovery. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), Pierre Bourdieu criticizes material demonstrations of superiority and defends that these have nothing to do with “enchanted superiority” in individuals.<sup>73</sup> With this argument in mind, it turns out that identity perceived as a material entity is actually a principle widely recognized as a way to guide social behavior. Hipster identity has become so popular because it signals a style that communicates “coolness”, attracting many followers across the globe. The challenge then is to find a way to delimit and define this cultural subgroup which no longer fits into any cultural framework. This conclusion further explains, on the one hand, the difficulty of defining what is “uniquely hipster” and, on the other hand, the attention that is being paid to the issue in the academic and media discourse. The journalist Mark Greif suggests that there is no clear distinction between us and them, the hipsters – a fact that nobody is willing to recognize. “The attempt to analyze hipsters calls everyone’s bluff. [...] Many of us try to justify our privileges by pretending that our superb tastes and intellect prove we deserve them, reflecting our inner superiority.”<sup>74</sup> This might be the reason why after reading this paper, one may even start wondering: Am I a hipster?

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<sup>73</sup> Mark Greif, “The Hipster in the Mirror,” *New York Times*, 12 November 2010, Sunday Book Review.

<sup>74</sup> Greif, “The Hipster in the Mirror.”

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