

**Subcultures and Authenticity: How do subcultures  
respond to co-optation of their authenticity?**

Bachelor's Thesis  
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### **Abstract**

Cultural fragmentation into different narratives and ways of identity construction has made marketplace communities an appealing research topic for marketing studies. Subcultures in particular are unique, as they enjoy a marginal status and create and consume practices that are considered authentic. The constant search for originality and novel sources of cultural production makes subcultures vulnerable to mass-market co-optation. Cultural and creative industries benefit from productising the myths that undergrounds create.

This thesis provides insights on how subcultures respond to co-optation and how marketers should treat them. The primary findings are that subcultures either (1) abandon their co-opted culture and search meaning elsewhere, (2) they modify their subcultural capital and reinvent themselves, and (3) they form alternative markets, where communal values exceed economic interests.

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**Keywords** subculture, authenticity, co-optation, underground, consumer culture theory, subcultural capital

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# 1. Introduction

Subcultures have been a subject of interest in research for a long time, first in the sociology and anthropology domains (e.g. Hall & Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; Cohen, 1980) and more recently in marketing studies (e.g. Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Leigh et al., 2006; Canniford, 2011). According to Schouten & McAlexander (1995), a subculture is an “identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression” (p. 43). Subcultures produce and perform identities as a part of a group which are considered authentic. Their cultural capital-based social hierarchies and unique forms of expression set them apart from mainstream cultures but make them also appealing for consumer markets.

Businesses benefit from co-opting cultural meanings because they serve as a novel source of creativity to capitalise on (Jameson, 1992; Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Beverland et al., 2021; Arvidsson, 2007). However, adopting and commodifying them for the mainstream creates a discrepancy between commercial and authentic (Lamla, 2016), which can alienate its original creators (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and lead to active brand-avoidance (Charmley et al., 2013). Thus, for brands to stay approved within insider groups it is important to understand the logic of subcultures (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Authenticity is highlighted to be one of the most important marketing topics to date (e.g. Nunes et al., 2021) because it affects brand equity and loyalty (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and makes the consuming experience more valuable (Goulding & Derbaix, 2019). Furthermore, authenticity is deeply embedded in contemporary culture because it equates to the ongoing quest for meaning in life (Södergren, 2021).

This thesis reviews literature on the relationship of subcultures and brands in the light of perceived authenticity. The aim is to examine how subcultures work, how marketers should treat them and to demonstrate the cyclical nature of the market. The primary research question this thesis answers is:

**How do subcultures respond to co-optation of their authenticity?**

To answer the primary research question, we need the following supporting questions to understand subcultures, subcultural authenticity and co-optation:

1. What are subcultures and how are they organised?
2. How is subcultural authenticity produced?
3. What are the effects of co-optation of subcultural authenticity?

This thesis begins by taking a look at subcultures through relevant literature (e.g. Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Kates, 2002; Leigh et al., 2006; Canniford, 2011; Thornton, 1995) and examines what kinds of communities exist in the marketplace. In chapter 3, authenticity is defined within the past 25 years of research (e.g. Södergren, 2021; Nunes et al., 2021; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019) and how it is produced and consumed within subcultures. Thereafter, this thesis analyses the relationship through co-optation theory and examines how subcultures respond to commodification. In chapter 4, the findings and implications for marketing are discussed and a further look at limitations and potential future research topics is presented.

Material was searched primarily in the EBSCO business database, using the keywords “authenticity”, “co-optation”, “appropriation”, “subculture”, “underground” and limiting the search to peer-reviewed papers only. Irrelevant terms such as “managerial authenticity” or “political co-optation” were excluded. Google Scholar was used to source other relevant articles in interdisciplinary journals. The primary academic sources in this thesis stem from the Journal of Consumer Research and peer-reviewed books published by Routledge and Elsevier. As the topic falls under the field of Consumer Consumption Theory (Arnould & Price, 2005), important seminal articles from the sociology domain are included as well (e.g. Bourdieu, Thornton and Hebidge). Furthermore, the literature reviews in the primary sources were utilised to add relevant research from other fields that are frequently referenced to in subcultural studies.

## 2. Subcultures

### 2.1. Definition

The marketplace consists of several fields of consumption and communities within them (Arsel & Thompson, 2011), including subcultures. Marketing literature defines subcultures as marginal groups within a dominant culture that share common practices and devotion: shared beliefs, values, symbols, knowledge and language (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Furthermore, they form a hierarchical social structure that defines the position, influence and cultural capital an individual has within the group (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Kates, 2002; Leigh et al., 2006). Examples of impactful research on subcultures include DJ cultures (Thornton, 1995), bikers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), punkers (Hebdige, 1979), deviant youth (Hall, 1975), mountaineers (Belk & Costa, 1998), vintage car owners (Leigh et al., 2006) and boarders (Charmley et al., 2013). Existing research has studied subcultures organised also around ethnicity, religion, profession or sexual orientation (e.g. Solomon, 2004; Kates, 2002).

Despite a shared ethos, subcultures are not homogenous groups and multiple values can coexist within them (Beverland et al., 2010; Schouten et al., 2007). In fact, many subcultures describe themselves more often through what they are not than through what they are (Thornton, 1995), suggesting that they form when the parent culture does not meet needs. Consequently, subcultures differ from mainstream culture by demonstrating certain marginality and exclusivity. The social hierarchy protects them from external adoption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Leigh et al., 2006) and depending on how they are organised, they can have several sub-hierarchies within (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Leigh et al., 2006; Goulding & Saren, 2007). The social logic and hierarchies will be discussed in more detail later.

De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan (2007) criticise the narrow focus marketing studies take on subcultures and the lack of proper definition. The key argument is that subcultures cannot be explicitly viewed through consumption and that marketing studies overemphasise the role of brands and commodities by assuming they exist solely around them. This approach overlooks the reason why subcultures exist and their historical and symbolic value. Therefore, for the purpose of

this thesis, it is relevant to explain the terminological differences of subcultures, subcultures of consumption, consumer tribes and brand communities.

### **2.1.1. Subculture**

The contemporary definition and research of subcultures stem from sociology and have focused on deviancy, marginality, class and the relationship between subcultures and the dominant culture (de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007). In a sociological context, a subculture is often synonymous with counter-culture as it rejects aspects of the parent culture's ideology by producing meanings and combining symbols in a way that is inconsistent with the majority norm (Hebdige, 1979). Firat & Venkatesh (1995) argue that we live in the so-called postmodern time in which consumption and consumer practices have changed, hence subcultures cannot be exclusively explained through social class, age or gender (Bennet, 1999).

Canniford (2011) identifies three qualities that describe a subculture across literature fields: cohesiveness, devotion and resistance. Cohesiveness stands for the social orders which are kept in place by authority members, strong bonds, ritualised forms of expressions and unique beliefs. Devotion stands for the acculturation process a new member goes through and the knowledge and practical expertise that is developed. Resistance comprises the political, hedonic and stylistic practices that separate the subculture from the culture it exists in, and it is used to protect from inauthenticity.

De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan (2007) differentiate a subculture from other consumption communities by stating "subcultures do not function like a brand community or subculture of consumption where the relationship between consumer and product is stable and necessary in order for the consumer to participate in that community" (p. 205). Here, a subculture stands for a more holistic commitment, i.e. lifestyle. It encompasses aspects of life exceeding consumption such as social relations, spiritual experiences, values and ideologies (Kates, 2002).

The challenge in defining a subculture per se is that meanings change over time and so do discourses between fields. It appears that subcultures today are more fragmented (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), are not built on counter-cultural values (Thornton, 1995; Heath & Potter, 2004), are more transient (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) or emerge more casually or sparsely (Kozinets, 2002; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), are based more loosely on social connection, styles and practices (Thornton, 1995) and focus more on self-transformation than collective identities (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Williams & Vannini, 2016). These findings indicate that contemporary subcultures are more taste-cultures than united forms of deviance. However, this does not mean that scholars can only focus on *how* subcultures work instead of examining *why* they exist (see De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007).

What can be drawn from the aforementioned is that motives for being part of a subculture and the role it has in one's life vary drastically and are dependent on time. In post-modernity, the market logic has become a part of communities, which were previously predominantly social spaces (Kozinets, 2002; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

### **2.1.2. Subculture of consumption**

Subculture of consumption was first introduced by Schouten & McAlexander (1995) in a study of urban bikers, after which the term established itself in marketing literature. The definition stems from the marketing research tradition of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) which examines sociocultural dimensions of consumption on different levels. CCT looks at cultures mediated through the market and individuals as dependent on building their identity and relationships with others through market offerings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Hence, different marketplace communities have been the subject of interest in marketing research.

A subculture of consumption encompasses individuals that are specifically drawn to brands, objects or product classes that represent their common values and consumption behaviour (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Leigh et al., 2006). Subcultures of consumption build an ideology out of the consumption practices and minimise a collective identity in favour of self



construction (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). They can form around any consumption activity, provided that the group shares these values (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) and can be active innovators in development of markets and products (Goulding & Saren, 2007). Elliott & Davies (2006) therefore suggest that contemporary subcultures of consumption are better defined through their social structures than resistance against the dominant order.

### **2.1.3. Brand community**

A brand community as introduced by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) is a community in consumer culture which operates entirely around one brand, regardless of geographical location. It could be described as a fanbase; a commercial variant of a subculture of consumption that embraces the parent culture's norms and commercial ethos, hence has no counter-cultural origins (Canniford, 2011). Brand communities willingly co-create value with businesses, for example by spreading word-of-mouth, providing insights and serving as loyal customers.

What differentiates a brand community from the two other forms of subcultures is the relationship with brands. Subcultures are devoted to a practice or consumption activity and perform certain marginality. For subcultures, brands always pose a risk of exploitation (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), whereas brand communities voluntarily benefit the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In addition, being part of a brand community does not affect an individual's life as comprehensively, even if the brand may be worshipped and present daily (Canniford, 2011).

### **2.1.4. Consumer tribe**

Consumer tribe is a more recent term in marketing discourse. It was introduced by Maffesoli (1996) and articulated in consumer research by Cova et al. (2007) and Canniford (2011) to avoid categorisation of communities to which its members would not identify belonging to. Its emergence was influenced by the sociological concept of neo-tribalism, whose core argument is

that mass-culture has led to formation of many smaller groups based on taste and that humans form groups by nature instead of identifying within a larger entity (Mafessoli, 1996).

A consumer tribe is a hybrid culture that combines multiple marketplace resources, such as music, art, emotions, fashion and media in order to create something new. This activity can create unique commercial settings and brands in innovative ways. Consumer tribes are not dependent on single brands, but do draw their inspiration from the marketplace. (Canniford, 2011)

Members in consumer tribes are not monogamous. An individual can belong to several tribes simultaneously and tribes get established and vanish quite casually (Canniford, 2011). This rapid development, loose social structure and polygamy are key factors that differentiate them from subcultures of consumption, which are slower to change and strive to conserve their ethos.

## 2.2. Differences and similarities of marketplace communities

To make sense of the differences and to find commonalities, Table 1 visualises the frameworks of De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan (2007) and Canniford (2011).

Subculture	Subculture of Consumption	Brand Community	Consumer Tribe
Socially oriented	Socially oriented but social dynamics focus frequently on consumption and self	Commodity oriented	Socially oriented but social dynamics focus frequently on consumption
Experience based	Commodity based	Brand based	Marketplace resources based (music, culture, emotions, fashion media..)
Escapist from mainstream norms (resistant)	Operates within mainstream norms	Embraces mainstream norms	Ambivalent
Lifestyle	Can be both a lifestyle or a hobby	Does not dominate everyday life	Transient, does not dominate everyday life

Globally practised - that is participants move between geographic locations	Globally practised	Globally practised but requires no movement	Globally practised
Participants communicate via many means	Participants communicate via many means	Participants communicate via electronic means	Participants communicate via networks: electronic and physical means and platforms, and reinvent them
Activity precedes commercial interests	Activity requires commercial context	Activity requires commercial context	Activity can create new commercial contexts & brands
Activity exists outside of commercial interests	Activity is dominated by commercial interests	Activity is centred solely around commercial interests	Activity is dominated by commercial interests
Draws from a variety of inspirations	Draws from a limited variety of inspirations	Draws from singular inspiration	Draws from a variety of inspirations

Table 1, Adopted from De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan (2007) and Canniford (2011)

Although being vague empiric categorisations, Table 1 illustrates how the level of commitment and comprehensiveness differs within these groups and what drives them. It is evident that there are several similarities among all of them, most notably between subcultures and subcultures of consumption. Some scholars therefore imply that subcultures of consumption are the post-modern versions of subcultures (Canniford, 2011; Heath & Potter, 2004).

Figure 1 suggests a more fluid relationship by coining these different consumption communities as a two-dimensional matrix, which takes the several overlaps into account (Canniford, 2011). The horizontal axis represents the diversity in expression from a singular brand to several and the vertical axis illustrates the ethos the consumption community is built on. 'X' marks the spot where overlaps of consumers living the lifestyle and part-time consumers are most likely to happen.

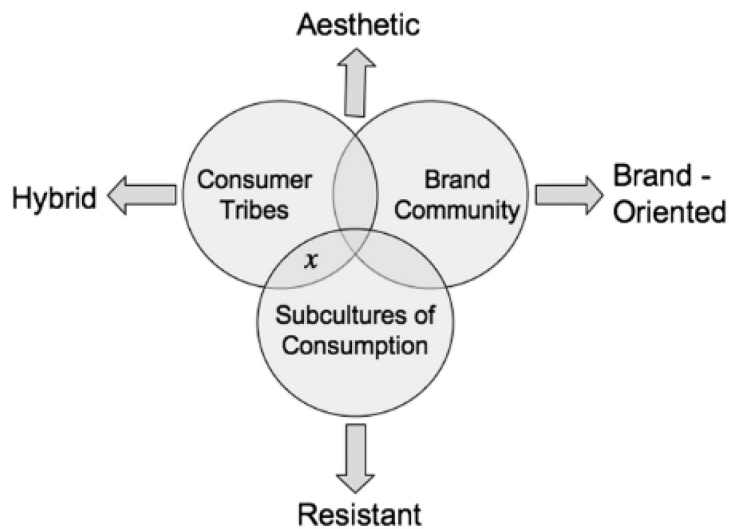


Figure 1, “Permeable and Contested Borders Between Consumption Communities” by Canniford (2011)

Two fundamental factors that set a subculture apart can be identified: the role of the commercial context and the comprehensiveness in one’s life. A subculture is not primarily brand, commodity or market oriented, and the devotion to an activity does not depend on them. De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan (2007) give the example of surfing as an activity that would only stop if waves ceased to exist. While subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes all are forms of social consumption, subcultures try to function outside of mainstream norms and consumer culture. (Canniford, 2011) Whether this is possible or not is contested. Kozinets (2002) observed that escaping the market logic can only be local or temporary and is more a protest against mainstream consumerism than commerce as an activity.

Secondly, the nature of a subculture is different from a consumption activity which happens only on weekends or special occasions (Kates, 2002). Subcultural participation is an all-embracing and enduring lifestyle. This manifests well in Kate’s (2002) study of gay men, who, as a minority, must deal with political, cultural and spiritual dimensions all their life. Here, subcultural membership affects all aspects of life, in which consumption is only one factor.

In this thesis, we use the broad definition of subcultures as socially oriented groups that share common values and practices that differ from mainstream norms but view them primarily through marketing literature. In Figure 1, it falls under the umbrella subcultures of consumption, in varying

degrees of resistance and hybrid/commercial. This thesis excludes brand communities and consumer tribes and focuses on practices that are more comprehensively part of its members' daily lives.

### **2.3. Cultural & subcultural capital**

To better understand the dynamics of a subculture, we briefly examine the concepts of (sub)cultural capital and social capital. Bourdieu (1986) developed the concept of cultural capital to supplement economic capital that takes a narrow-minded look at the universe as goods that yield profit. In his theory, he defines cultural capital as knowledge that is developed by upbringing and education and affects social status. Hence, it takes three forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. The amount of cultural capital an individual possesses is relative to the effort and time they have put into acquiring it and differs from economic capital in its transmissibility; economic capital can be exchanged instantly through e.g. a transaction or trade, whilst cultural capital can only accumulate over time (for example music taste) or not be transferable at all (for example personal acknowledgements). In other words, cultural capital represents what you know and own.

Social capital, on the other hand, reflects who you know and vice versa. It is the value created and used through social networks. Social capital has a symbiotic relationship with cultural capital because what is considered culturally significant is largely defined socially. (Bourdieu, 1986) Hence, social capital is deeply embedded in cultural capital, and manifests most prominently in its embodied state.

Challenging and building on the concept of cultural capital, Thornton (1995) introduced subcultural capital, which is a combination of knowledge, possession of relevant material, appearance and style, and perceived commitment to a scene. Arsel & Thompson, (2011) later defined it as field-dependent cultural capital to be applicable in a wider range of contexts. Thornton examined it in a DJ culture which is primarily a taste-culture, thus subcultural capital can here be simplified as the amount of 'hipness' one possesses. The key differences to Bourdieu's cultural

capital are the importance of media and class. Subcultural capital is not as much dependent on socio-economic class because it functions as an escape from it (Thornton, 1995). Accordingly, the accumulation of subcultural capital is not institutionalised, which would depend on high-cultural attributes, such as upbringing or education that are often inherited from parents. Instead, it consists of intra- and interpersonal experiences that increase both the sense of self and belonging to a community as an authentic member (Leigh et al., 2006). The second difference as per Thornton (1995) is the role of media and the consumption of it. For Bourdieu, media is only a means of recognition that can increase cultural capital, however for subcultures today, it plays an important role in conveying knowledge and creating networks. Media creation, coverage and exposure have an influence on what is considered fashionable, which again dictates the amount of subcultural capital.

The accumulation of subcultural capital is driven by identity investments in a specific field of consumption (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). It is a combination of material, immaterial and social aspects (Thornton, 1995). Hipness is built through taste and style that materialises in such things as fashion and music, immaterial knowledge and expertise, whilst socially, it means ‘fitting’ into the scene, which requires silent approval from relevant others belonging to it (Leigh et al., 2006; Kozinets, 2002). Only owning relevant objects, such as a museum-type car (Leigh et al., 2006) or a Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) is not alone a sign of being part of the subculture, but requires personal investment and taking part in the experiences that the group deems authentic (Leigh et al., 2006). More recent research suggests that subcultural capital is not based on uncontested criteria, but one’s status can be negotiated (see Kates, 2002; Beverland et al., 2010).

#### **2.4. Hierarchies within subcultures**

Hierarchies within and across subcultures are based on the amount of subcultural and social capital their members possess, specifically in the embodied state (Arthur & Sherman, 2010). The evaluation of the hierarchy is driven by its members' judgments of authenticity and commitment to the group's values and ethos (Leigh et al., 2006; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Charmley et

al., 2013). However, since subcultures are not homogenous (Schouten et al., 2007) and multiple values can coexist (Beverland et al., 2010), the social hierarchies and positions can also be fluid and negotiable (Kates, 2002). Arthur & Sherman (2010) found that members high on subculture-specific social capital are given more freedom of expression because their commitment and knowledge has already been proven. This challenges Schouten & McAlexander's (1995) finding that increasing and maintaining social status is causal with levels of commitment. Figure 2 visualises the subcultural hierarchy in this fluid manner, where a member frequently moves up and down based on others' assessment of their capital.

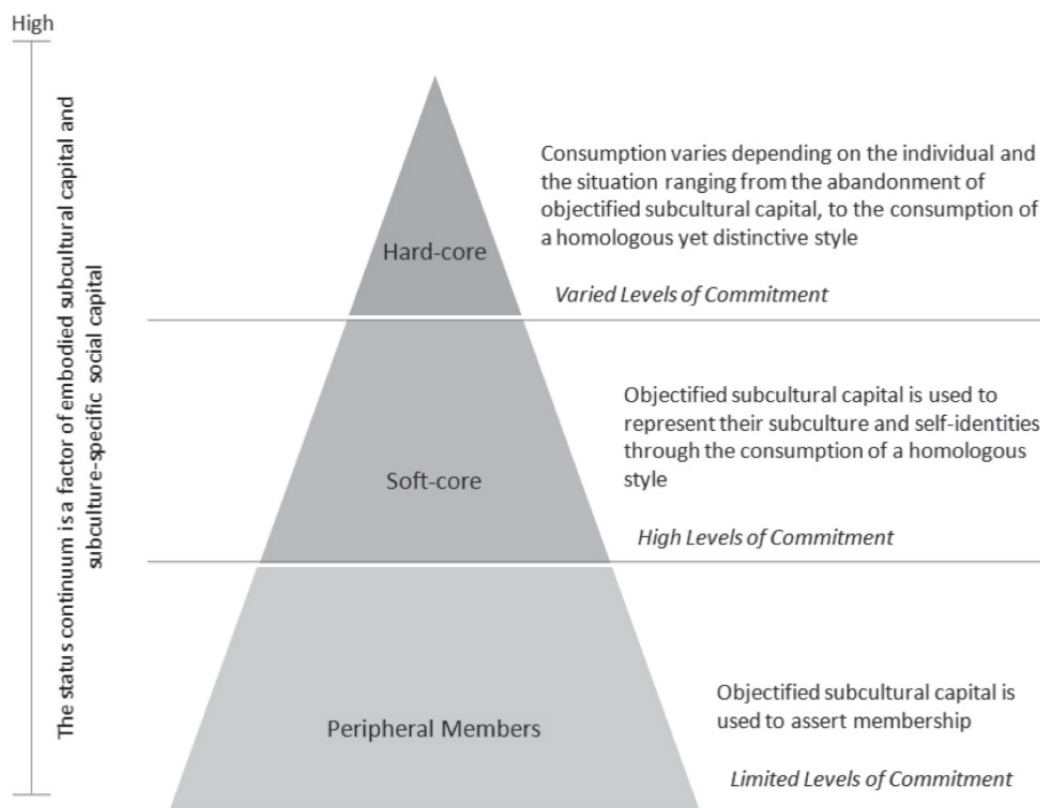


Figure 2, “Status Within A Consumption-Oriented Counterculture” by Arthur & Sherman (2010)

In subcultural studies, the core group consists of individuals who have internalised the way of living and possess a large base of knowledge, whom Leigh et. al (2006) call “gurus”, Schouten & McAlexander (1995) “hard core”, Canniford (2011) “authority figures”, Charmley et al. (2013) “insiders” and Arvidsson (2007) “deep-underground”. These individuals are high on subcultural capital and are often also the ones producing and defining it (Thornton, 1995). The “hard core” is

surrounded by a bigger number of less involved members, or “soft-core” (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The third level consists of peripheral members or outsiders, whom insiders often deem as posers because they are perceived as novelty- and fashion-hunters, therefore inauthentic (Charmley et al., 2013; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2002; Arthur & Sherman, 2010).

To integrate into a subculture, an individual has to adopt a set of practices and knowledge as well as assimilate the look and ethos. Schouten & McAlexander (1995) call this the transformation of self. In their study, newcomers enter the culture on their own and start at the bottom of the social hierarchy, from which they can rise in status through time. New members are treated with caution until they prove that they are not going to abandon the community when trends shift (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1990). Arthur & Sherman (2010) observed that in the early stages, objectified capital has a larger role in a member’s transformation because it is part of assembling required knowledge of the culture. When being perceived as a committed member, one’s embodied capital has a greater influence on one’s status because it signals intrapersonal authenticity.

### **3. Co-optation of subcultural authenticity**

#### **3.1. Definition of authenticity**

Authenticity has established itself as a relevant research topic during the past 25 years and matters for consumers, cultures and brands because it is central to the quest for purpose and belonging in life. (Södergren, 2021; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Authenticity is commonly defined as something that is genuine, real and/or true (Beverland & Farelly, 2010; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019; Grayson & Martinec, 2004), whereas reasons, motivations and means for consumers to find authenticity in objects, brands and experiences vary. Multiple scholars point out that authenticity is a fluid social construction, based on an individual's or group’s social role and goals, and that it is context dependent and negotiable (Goulding & Derbaix, 2019; Arnould & Price, 2000; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Nunes et al., 2021; Rose & Wood, 2005; Leigh et al., 2006). It is neither an inherent attribute but is defined by the person evaluating it (Rose & Wood, 2005). Therefore,



varying identity benefits allow consumers to find and produce authenticity, even when norms speak against their definition of authentic (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

Brand authenticity is the extent to which consumers see the brand through the aforementioned; being true to itself and its consumers (Morhart et al., 2015). Culturally, authenticity has been associated with being true to yourself, acting autonomously and searching for meaning (Södergren, 2021), while brand authenticity has become a means for consumers to build their identity through consumption of objects and experiences (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Arnould & Price, 2000). Arnould & Price (2000) argue that this progression is the result of the globalised marketplace, excessive visual stimulus and diminishing of traditional values and meanings, which has led to fragmentation of cultures (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). From an individual's point of view, this means that identity building and self-authentication rely more on personal desires than on a “master narrative” dictated by a mutual culture.

Based on the aforementioned, Morhart et al. (2015) identified three perspectives on authenticity: objectivist, constructivist and existential. The objectivist view sees authenticity as something inherent that can be unbiasedly measured, the constructivist view ties it to personal experiences and the ability to build authenticity based on those experiences, while the existential view characterises authenticity as endogenous identity projects of the self. Most researchers see authenticity as a combination of all of these (e.g. Leigh et al., 2006; Morhart et al., 2015; Goulding & Derbaix, 2019), hence these three views are embedded in the chapters below.

### **3.2. Authentic practices within subcultures**

In chapter 2, it was concluded that contemporary subcultures are primarily taste-cultures that produce and reproduce symbolic order. Styles and practices performed by them are considered authentic, which is the primary factor defining their social and subcultural capital (Leigh et al., 2006). Belk & Costa's (1998) findings indicate that subcultures negotiate authenticity socially and what is contributing to the common myth seems to be more important than objective attributes.

Beverland et al. (2010) identified the desire for self and social identity construction to be coexisting values that drive subcultural authenticity. According to Arnould & Price (2000), this narrative of self is sustained through authenticating acts (integrating experiences with self-development, and being true to yourself) and authoritative performances (performing significant life moments, traditions and rituals as a part of a community). Wang (1999) calls these intrapersonal and interpersonal authenticity. For a community to persist, it must allow its members both intrapersonal self-authentication on an individual level as well as interpersonal authoritative performances on a collective level (Arnould & Price, 2000).

Leigh et al. (2006) demonstrated that MG car owners experience their true selves through the object and ownership. Similarly, Goulding & Derbaix (2019) examined that authenticity is incorporated in objects combined with personal history. For subcultures, group membership is crucial, because self-authentication is assessed by peers and the authenticity of their members affect the collective authenticity (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Therefore, this thesis next examines how material authenticity and personal authenticity are evaluated.

### **3.2.1. Evaluation of what is authentic**

Nunes et al. (2021) identified six general components that guide consumers' judgement on authenticity of market offerings. Those are accuracy (delivering on promises and being true to its value proposition), connectedness (how engaged or emotionally attached the consumer feels), integrity (how sincere and intrinsically motivated the provider is), legitimacy (obedience to shared norms and morals), originality (being distinctly different to others), and proficiency (how skilled the provider of a product or service is considered). These do not exist in isolation but are rather used as combinations depending on the context.

To characterise how consumers identify the above, Grayson & Martinec (2004) introduced the semiotic concepts of indexical and iconic authenticity. Index stands for a physical or psychic link, an attribute that reveals originality. For instance, a historical object is indexical if it is the original. This evaluation always requires additional field-specific knowledge. Iconic authenticity, on the

other hand, is something that resembles indexical authenticity: a reproduction or representation. In the study of the MG subculture, a car that captures the MG brand's essence, but is not fully built of the real parts, is considered iconically authentic, whereas an original MG from the 60s would be indexically authentic (Leigh et al., 2006).

Indexicality and iconicity rely on the material side of authenticity but do not take the role of self nor identity into account (Leigh et al., 2006). Furthermore, experiencing authenticity is not always embedded in the subject itself but can also be co-produced (Rose & Wood, 2005) and fabricated (Belk & Costa, 1998), meaning that authenticity can be a mixture of real and fantasy. Since embodied cultural capital has a more significant influence on the social dynamics of subcultures than objectified cultural capital (Arthur & Sherman, 2010), this thesis looks next at who is considered authentic.

### **3.2.2. Evaluation of who is authentic**

It is not only the objects and practices that are labelled authentic but also consumers performing them (Leigh et al., 2006). This is what Wang (1999) groups as existential authenticity, which is an activity where consumers search and construct their genuine self. Existential authenticity cannot be defined through indexes because it involves subjective feelings that can transform fantasy to personal reality (Leigh et al., 2006; Rose & Wood, 2005).

Within subcultures, the authenticity of a member is evaluated through knowledge, expertise and commitment, which correspond to the accumulation of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Since subcultures are social constructs, the authenticity of an individual is equally important to the objects and practices they consume, and this affects also across-group hierarchies (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Ultimately, this evaluation comes down to the balance of being versus doing: an authentic member of a subculture earns their status by engaging into activities over time, by producing subcultural capital and by achieving self-authentication via communities (being) (Arnould & Price, 2000), while those who only adopt the looks without embracing the lifestyle are merely consuming the role (doing) (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1990). In other words, embodied

cultural capital reflects the genuine self, which is constructed, not purchased (Williams & Vannini, 2016). Arsel & Thompson (2011) report similar findings in examining hipsters and indie cultures, where hipsters are perceived as consumers who do not produce any cultural value. Beverland et al. (2010) challenge this view by demonstrating that both views can coexist within a subculture, depending on whether the individual is drawn to communal aspects, the imagery associated with it or both. This finding indicates diversity in expression and rejects the idea of subcultures being dominated by a single set of values.

Beverland et al. (2010) identify four themes that affect the perception of an authentic subcultural member: sincerity of motive, levels of engagement, temporality and authority, which are in line with the framework proposed by Nunes et al. (2021). Sincerity stands for genuine motives, the willingness to do an activity for the sake of it without vested interests (Kozinets, 2002; Charmley et al., 2013), i.e. integrity. Level of engagement stands for the commitment to the group's ethos and ideology, i.e. accuracy. Temporality relates to the acculturation process of the group's members and the perceived longevity, where newcomers need to prove their commitment (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1990), i.e. legitimacy. Authority is ultimately someone who determines what is authentic behaviour and decides who belongs and who does not (Beverland et al., 2010). It should be considered figuratively because the assessment of authenticity happens on a collective level, albeit members with high subcultural capital can have a large influence on it (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Leigh et al., 2006).

### **3.2.3. The inauthentic others and the mainstream**

Subcultures often define themselves through what they are not, what they stand against (Thornton, 1995) or what they dislike (Bourdieu, 1984). Williams & Vannini (2016) observed that punk rockers were more united by a common rejection against a perceived homogenic mainstream culture than by shared practices. This points to both an inherent distinction from the masses as well as to the tension of “insiders” and “outsiders”, based on collective judgements of authenticity using the previously mentioned criteria (Charmley et al., 2013). Inauthenticity threatens the existence of

subcultures because it would grant access to anyone owning relevant material which can be acquired purely by economic capital without devotion to the culture (Leigh et al., 2006).

Fieldwork shows that spectators at the Burning Man festival who were not holistically involved, bikers who were not embracing the lifestyle, MG car owners who presented a lack of devotion, consumers that consume indie culture for its coolness, and hip hoppers who do not value the culture's history were regarded as outsiders and therefore inauthentic (Kozinets, 2002; Schouten & McAlexander; Leigh et al., 2006; Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Arthur & Sherman, 2010). Thornton (1995) calls this opposite of authentic the "imagined other". "Imagined" refers to an undefined mass which is not empirically observed but perceived as the mainstream. To prevent adoption from the mainstream culture, subcultures reject inauthenticity through this kind of confrontation. In the case of Burning Man, it is the capitalist consumerism, among the new bikers the posers, in the MG subculture the ones who do not drive their car and in the indie culture the ones who do not contribute. This fictitious opponent creates internal cohesion, sense of belonging and a sense of inferiority of others (Charmley et al., 2013; Thornton, 1995), and leaves more room for the subculture to negotiate authenticity (Williams & Vannini, 2016).

Charmley et al. (2013) report similar results from examining a skateboarding subculture. The new finding is that actors deemed as "inauthentic others" are associated with certain brands and that their values and motives conflict with those of the subculture. Given the strong social bonds of some subcultures, this judgement of inauthenticity culminates in the choice of brands, which can lead to collective brand avoidance.

### 3.3. Co-optation

*“Cultural goods can be appropriated both materially—which presupposes economic capital—and symbolically—which presupposes cultural capital.”* (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 20)

Co-optation is an activity in which an entity takes over symbols and meanings in favour of creating new ones out of them (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). In the classic co-optation theory, this entity is the dominant culture that aims to neutralise deviance threatening societal conformity (Hebdige, 1979) and more recently the mainstream markets that capitalise on creating new ways of consumer self-expression and identity building (Holt, 2002). In this thesis, we examine the latter, which can be appropriating meanings of existing resources (such as the Harley or MG brand) or commodifying symbols, styles and practices that are entirely created by the underground (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016; Arvidsson 2007).

Common motives for corporate co-optation are to make brands cool (Warren et al., 2019) and to find new sources of cultural production (Arvidsson, 2007). It is in the cultural industries’ interests to extract new marketplace myths from the underground because its producers are autonomous and not constrained by any logic (Arvidsson, 2007). When subcultural authenticity appeals to a broader mainstream of consumers, it becomes adopted and limited to commodities. What co-optation essentially produces is cultural icons, such as the Rolling Stones, and stereotypes of communities, such as bikers, hipsters and goths (Arsel & Thompson, 2011).

Becoming part of the mass culture is a common concern to subcultures because it means a loss of identity. This is what happens when a subculture gets co-opted: commodification eliminates deviance and mutes any unwanted ideological, symbolical or political associations (Arvidsson, 2007; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Hebdige, 1979), confining the group into a marketplace myth (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). In other words, the subculture loses its uniqueness and control over its authenticity. As mentioned earlier, cultural and consequently subcultural capital are not directly transferable to economic capital due to the acculturation process a member undergoes. Therefore, converting subcultural capital into economic capital requires simplifying it into a market-friendly form (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016).

Schiele & Venkatesh (2016) identified four levels of commodification that subcultures face: mimicking, mainstreaming, mis-labelling and misinterpretation. Mimicry is the act of trying to reassemble something by selectively choosing and combining elements with something else. Members of subcultures often recognise the “posers” through lack of attention to detail and low level of involvement (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Mainstreaming relates to marketplace co-optation in which subcultural symbols and practices are liquidated into the mainstream and converted into economic capital. Mis-labelling is synonymous to inaccurate identification based on classifications or stereotypes and is generally perceived as offensive or even discriminatory. For a subculture, mis-labelling means that its existence, motives and meanings are purposefully or inadvertently misunderstood. Lastly, misinterpretation is a form of cultural appropriation, by not transferring meanings accurately or taking them out of their original context. In Schiele & Venkatesh’s (2016) study of Harajuku, misinterpretation is most notable, since the origins of the subculture stem from a non-western context.

### **3.3.1. Commodification cycle**

A common finding is that when commodified, the original subculture gradually dissolves and its members find new meanings elsewhere (Goulding & Saren, 2007). However, given lengthy identity investments and accumulation of field-specific cultural capital, it is unlikely that vested consumers would give up on their meanings easily (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). Coming to the same conclusion, Schiele & Venkatesh (2016) examined subcultural reclamation by reinvention and by repurposing meanings, which in this thesis is explained through the commodification cycle (Figure 3).

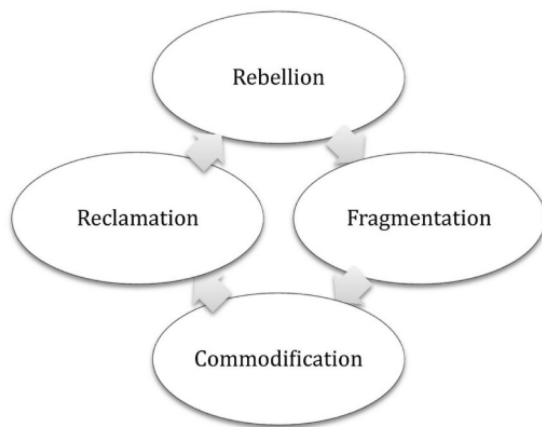


Figure 3, “Subcultural commodification model” by Goulding & Saren (2007) and revised by Schiele & Venkatesh (2016)

Figure 3 shows the life cycle of subcultures, which reassembles the product life cycle theory, with the difference that it is cyclical instead of linear. Here, the formation of a subculture starts from rebellion which is born from resistance against a dominant norm or from unmet identity needs (Goulding & Saren, 2007). Once the deviant or unique forms of expression become popular and marketable, commodity-based adoption or ideological redefinition is more likely, which leads to fragmentation (Hebdige, 1979). Fragmentation is defined as splitting up a single reality into multiple ones and losing any connection to the original whole (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). At this point, the subculture becomes vulnerable to external influences because internal incoherence leads to loss of protective hierarchies. Although value co-existence and diverse forms of expression is what keeps a community alive in the long run (Arnould & Price, 2000), splitting into several sub-groups means that authenticity becomes paradoxically even more marginal, and tensions between groups make it hard to look after the common values and practices.

Fragmentation is followed by a gradual commodification and appropriation of group identity. What the group loses is its authenticity as now, anyone can be part of it through the acquisition of commodities (Goulding & Saren, 2007; Leigh et al., 2006). In other words, the subculture becomes infiltrated by inauthentic others or as Leigh et al. (2006) put it “Inauthentic poseurs do not understand and value the nonmonetary aspects of the culture and thereby commoditize the product and threaten communal boundaries. Furthermore, posers threaten each legitimate member's sense of self” (p. 491). The result is that the original members exit the group or find identity projects elsewhere (Goulding & Saren, 2007).



The commodification model reveals several indications of how late-modern markets work and how subcultures survive in them. Firstly, the commodification model reveals a pattern in subcultural identity preservation in which practices that did not originally fit into mainstream norms ironically later become desirable for the masses. This model indicates that the fast pace of the late-modern markets “force” adaptation, which to some extent explains why contemporary subcultures are primarily viewed through consumption. The mentality of constant self-improvement and growth obliges subcultures to follow the same logic. Goulding & Saren (2007) summarise it well: “These micro-communities may start off as rebellious collectives, but eventually evolve, fragment and grow as consumer collectives, markets and entrepreneurial businesses. Values, beliefs and forms of expression change, as do the symbolic meanings and the nature of the commodities used to support and maintain the subculture” (p. 240).

### **3.3.2. Countermeasures**

Building on Goulding & Saren’s (2007) model, Schiele & Venkatesh (2016) observed an alternative outcome of subcultural co-optation: reclamation. Reclamation means that the subculture protects their subcultural capital by rediscovering authenticity and group meaning. In the study of the Japanese Harajuku subculture, the commodified group returned to the rebellion stage and focused on their membership ethos. Authenticity was reclaimed through paying attention to details that do not matter to the outsiders and through modifying their symbols. These modifications continue whenever the mainstream adopts the current styles (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016).

In examining the indie culture, Arsel & Thompson (2011) found that indie consumers reject the marketplace myth by a set of demythologising practices named aesthetic discrimination, symbolic demarcation and consumer sovereignty. Aesthetic discrimination is rejecting those sets of brands and practices that are associated with the commodified culture, i.e. marketplace myth. It is most often initiated by high status individuals who are also producers of cultural capital. This leads to symbolic demarcation, which is synonymous to reinventing yourself: re-discovering the roots and countercultural legacy from history and pulling identity benefits from it. The third strategy,

consumer sovereignty, opens an interesting discussion about the amount of sovereignty an individual has within a community. Paradoxically, a unified ethos within a subculture can make its members associated with a marketplace myth and therefore more vulnerable to commodification. The informants of Arsel & Thompson (2011) reported the need for individual expression, which is in line with how Arnould & Price (2000) see communities survive in the long run. While not undisputedly applicable to subcultures, the study reveals tendencies in which consumers preserve their authenticity when associated with certain cultures or communities.

### **3.3.3. Subcultures and the market**

In studies of subcultures, many researchers report clear discrepancies between commercial interests and authenticity (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Arsel & Thompson, 2011) or even labelling commercialism as the antithesis of what is authentic (see Lamla, 2016; Södergren, 2021). The examination of a countervailing market system challenges the binary confrontation of commercial versus non-commercial by presenting a smaller local indie-market where authenticity is preserved (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). The key finding is that corporate co-optation can also create new markets that respect the ethos of the co-opted group. The same could be applicable to subcultures that form into consumption communities. It furthermore adds to the understanding of whether someone is inherently part of the market by offering nuances to the hegemon of commercialism. Based on these findings, it seems that subcultures and commercial activities only collide when sincerity is lost and the commercial activity is intended for mass cultures. Similarly, it seems that subcultural distinction is primarily based on judgements of authenticity and not solely on how commercial they are (Charmley et al., 2013) and furthermore that resistance manifests mostly to protect from inauthenticity (Williams & Vannini, 2016).

## 4. Conclusions and discussion

This thesis examined the relationship between subcultures, authenticity and brand interests. Co-optation of subcultures as studied takes place in consumer markets and mostly materialises in fashion, music, media, advertising and other creative industries (Arvidsson, 2007). Co-optation poses a threat to subcultures because it allows admission of inauthentic others, who devalue the authenticity of the culture. Answering the research question of how subcultures react to the co-optation of their symbols and practices, this thesis identified three outcomes: (1) The subculture is either abandoned and its members search meaning elsewhere (e.g. Goulding & Saren, 2007), (2) the subcultures reclaim their identity by reinventing or modifying their subcultural capital or engage in counter-co-optation (e.g. Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016) or (3) countervailing markets are formed that are driven more by communal values than economic ones (e.g. Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007).

Undoubtedly, the co-optation theory poses quite a cynical view by implying that nothing stays untouched by markets or that everything is already part of it by default (see Heath & Potter, 2004). Combined with the inability to fully escape the market logic (Kozinets, 2002), co-optation triggers a spiral where subcultures and the underground must find new sources of authenticity and regularly reinvent themselves. Essentially, the more they engage in this spiral, the more energy and ideas they create for capitalism. In the same spirit, Jameson (1992) critiques the post-modern market economy in characterising it as an unavoidable mass-cultural hegemony that colonises people's thoughts and ways of life. Eventually, the question becomes more philosophical: who has the right to produce, consume and own culture and meaning? The cultural domain is important to examine because what is considered intellectual property is defined through regulations, such as copyright laws or patents, but leaves a lot unanswered. Furthermore, culture in general tends to use history as a source of inspiration for creation of the new, so originality can be questioned. (see Scafidi, 2005)

Brands that are driving the cause and contributing to the creation of field-specific cultural capital tend to be widely embraced within contemporary subcultures. They are embraced because their contribution to a subcultural activity conveys authenticity, and the brands can be part of members'

efforts to find their authentic selves. On the contrary, brands that exploit subcultures are deemed inauthentic and are often avoided (e.g. Charmley et al., 2013). The degree of commercial interests involved affects perceptions of an authentic brand. The rejection of mass-mediated commercialism seems to unite many subcultures, however, the level of resistance varies depending on the values the subculture embraces (see Figure 1). The resistance does not manifest explicitly against the market logic but against the mainstream consumers it creates, i.e. the inauthentic others (Charmley, 2013; Kozinets, 2002; Goulding & Saren, 2007; Williams & Vannini, 2016). Furthermore, inauthentic brands are seen as a threat for the existence of subcultures because they aim to capitalise on the myth the subculture has created (Arsel & Thompson, 2011).

Given these findings, it seems that to persist in late-modernity where a lion's share of culture is mediated through the market, subcultures need protection from commerce that they cannot control. This is why protecting subcultural authenticity through subcultural and social capital is key.

#### **4.1. Implications for subculture marketing**

For marketing and cultural branding implications, subcultures offer tremendous opportunities. Being able to establish a brand that is in line with communal values can attract communities that create a story around it, which may help brands to deliver their value proposition and foster extremely loyal customers. Furthermore, these brands have the potential to turn into cultural icons. However, making the market more approachable imposes risks that might alienate the loyal core of the subculture. As Schouten & McAlexander (1995) put it, there is a dilemma between those who create mystique around brands and those that generate profits. On the contrary, targeting subcultures exclusively can alienate mainstream customers, especially if the market is stigmatised (Choong et al., 2021).

For marketing, it is important to understand that subcultures are belief systems that do not exclusively form around consumption but through common ways of life. Marketers should understand what the subculture's devotion is and whether historical or ideological factors play a role in forming it. Treating subcultures simply as faddish communities that generate economic

capital can lead to counterreactions (Charmley et al., 2013). The distinction of subcultures, subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes will help marketers to understand how values, priorities, needs and philosophies manifest differently within them (De Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007) and consequently to make more focused decisions based on their target audience. For example, subcultures that ideologically reject the market logic require a fundamentally different approach than consumption communities that embrace a brand.

Marketers should also understand what role the brand has within the subculture: whether it is a means to perform an activity (and can easily be exchanged for another one), a symbolic expression or the core object, as in the case of Harley Davidson bikers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) or MG vintage car enthusiasts (Leigh et al., 2006). For subcultures, the authenticity of a brand is essential because it affects subcultural legitimacy (Leigh et al, 2006; Schuten & McAlexander, 1995; Kates, 2002; Charmley et al., 2013). Therefore, brands should pay attention to what affects their authenticity: although commercial activity is not considered bad per se by many subcultures (Charmley et. al, 2013; Kozinets, 2002), brands need to demonstrate sincere motives, avoid selling out and should not treat the subculture as “hip consumers” that purely exist to create mystique around commercial goods (Beverland et. al, 2010; Kozinets, 2002; Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Understanding of the brand’s market position is needed because large brands are more likely to be considered inauthentic due to their influence and consequently possibilities to co-opt. Brands that understand the ethos of the subculture can become active parts of it, however, that requires constant tinkering because authenticity is not stationary, as meanings, values and symbols change (Goulding & Saren, 2007).

## **4.2. Limitations & future research**

This thesis presents several limitations and identifies multiple research gaps. Marketing research on subcultures has concentrated around the turn of the century with less recent studies. When society evolves, also market forces change, which requires both follow-up studies of previously examined subcultures as well as examining new ones (Schouten et al., 2007). Furthermore, most existing studies have focused on subcultures in the western culture, indicating a need for a more

diverse examination of how they form in different cultural contexts. This also opens room for examination on whether western subcultures have appropriated other (sub)cultures.

Marketing studies to date have focused on subcultures that exhibit clear consumption practices but have lacked explicit examination of consumer motives for being part of one and historical analysis of their formation. Further research should also be conducted on hierarchies in subcultures, as the freedom of expression versus required homogeneity varies. Additionally, further research should be conducted on how mainstream consumers perceive brand authenticity of brands that have co-opted subcultural symbols, i.e. how authenticity is perceived through the eyes of the outsiders. This thesis provided a view on how subcultural insiders respond to co-optation. Another interesting topic to examine is what happens to authenticity when an underground culture naturally grows into a business, without external corporate involvement.

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