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Modified People: Indicators of Subculture in a Post-Subculture World

Abstract

This article contributes to the debate on the relevance of subculture as a theoretical concept for understanding groups in contemporary Western societies. Utilising data from a virtual ethnography of body modifiers, the article challenges the dominance of post-subcultural approaches. The body modification subculture discussed in this article has not only formed along socioeconomic lines, it has developed alternative work opportunities that enable and promote continued involvement in the subculture beyond one's youth. While scenes and (neo-)tribes maintain their relevance for scholars investigating groups with a more temporary nature, the data presented herein show that subcultures did not vanish as society transitioned from post-War to postmodernity.

Keywords

body modification, post-subculture, subculture

Introduction

Voluntary body modification in Western culture, including tattoos and piercings, has a long history marked by varied social (re)definitions. Throughout much of the last century, the definition was often tied to deviant behaviour and social undesirables. Recently, however, there has been a shift in the acceptability of body modification, as scholars and reporters are

quick to point to members of the middle class modifying their bodies for numerous reasons, including identity salience, rebellion and aesthetics. The tattoo, for example, has ‘undergone dramatic redefinition’ (Irwin, 2001: 50), shifting from a form of deviance to what younger generations consider an acceptable form of expression.

There are a number of factors contributing to the growing acceptability of body modification, including a demographic shift of body modifiers in the second half of the twentieth century. According to Steward (1990: 94), for example, the majority of people getting tattooed in the United States in the 1950s were young men from the ‘disadvantaged strata’ who could barely read. By the mid 1980s, however, nearly two-thirds of tattooees had completed at least some college and tattooing was spreading across gendered lines (Sanders, 1988). Whereas females were rarely tattooed in the 1950s (Steward, 1990), one in three tattooees was a female by the end of the century (Sanders, 1988). This trend has continued as women are now more likely than men to be tattooed. According to a recent Harris poll of the US public¹, 19% of men and 23% of women have been tattooed.

The inclusion of women and more educated individuals among body modifiers has led some scholars to presume body modification now belongs to the mainstream (Irwin, 2001). The regularity with which the tattooed bodies of professional athletes and celebrities are displayed across media platforms has also contributed to claims of mainstream acceptance (Kosut, 2006). A trend in body modification among mainstream individuals, however, does not mean it is socially acceptable across Western culture (Kang and Jones, 2007). Individuals with visible tattoos, for example, are more likely to face social and professional discrimination than those with concealable tattoos. To avoid these negative repercussions, mainstream tattooees (i.e. people who have tattoos and adhere to the norms of the dominant culture) typically choose to be tattooed in discreet locations (Author A).

It is imperative, therefore, that scholars differentiate between modifications that are always visible and those that can be hidden. For example, scholars should not place facial

tattoos on equal footing with lower back tattoos. Nor should they assume lobe and septum piercings are equally acceptable within mainstream culture. In short, there is a need to differentiate between individuals according to their level of involvement with body modification, just as one should differentiate between types of modification. I extend Bell's (1999) typology of tattooees to include other forms of body modification, differentiating between people with modifications (those who have a minimal number of discreet modifications) and modified people (those who have numerous visible modifications—including visible tattoos, non-normative piercings [e.g. not including standard gauge² lobe piercings on females], and/or more extreme forms of body modification, such as facial scarifications and subdermal implants).

Though the primary concern within body modification research has been the expansion of body modification across the socioeconomic spectrum, groups traditionally affiliated with the practice continue to be modified in ways that are seemingly meant to maintain a distinction between themselves and those who are getting one or a few minor modifications. This article draws upon a virtual ethnography of an online community of modified people who see themselves as being different from mainstream modifiers and who actively seek to maintain this difference. The primary intent of the research was to understand the group's response to the mainstreaming of body modification. However, it soon became clear that the composition and maintenance of the group are indicative of a subculture and necessitate the study's inclusion in the debate on the saliency of subculture as a valid theoretical concept.

Postmodern Bodies

As society has transitioned into an era in which the body can be self-determined, body modification has drawn interest from scholars studying the social construction of the body. For some, body modification exemplifies contemporary society's obsession with skin.

LaFrance (2009), on the other hand, sees the modification of skin as an attempt to embody the self. Indeed, body modifiers have frequently reported that their decision to alter the body has been an attempt to express and gain control over the self (Author A; Irwin, 2001).

The increasing desire to alter the body has been linked to the phenomenon of postmodernity (Langman, 2003), which is characterised by a lack of predetermined, fixed identities (Malson, 1999). As the uncertainties of postmodernity replace the certainties of modernity, many individuals turn to modifications in order to provide a stabilising force in their lives. Over the past few decades, the body has transformed into something 'to be moulded and selected at need or whim' (Synnott, 1993: 34). Something as seemingly natural as the human body has been so 'thoroughly denaturalized' that it is best thought of as a socially constructed object (Haraway, 1999: 207). According to Synnott (1993), the body is no longer a perfect, unchangeable object created and given by God. Rather, it is a plastic project that is to be bettered throughout one's life. As such, body modification is now just one of the manifold possibilities for manipulating the physical body, which cannot, on its own, 'serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men' (Foucault, 1977: 153).

Some postmodern body modifiers view their modifications as a way of battling, or correcting, the flaws of a receding modernity. Fisher argued that body modifications can be 'construed as a way in which the individual reclaims some power over his/her own body' (Fisher, 2002: 103). The heavily modified Modern Primitives are one group that exercises power over the body in order to distance themselves from contemporary Western society. Seeking to reconnect to pre-modern cultures through more conspicuous scarifications, tattoos, and piercings, Modern Primitives view their modifications as 'articulations of identities of resistance that reject the repression and conformity intrinsic to modernity' (Langman, 2003: 240). Many extreme modifiers seek to regain personal authenticity through their modifications. Even those with few tattoos or piercings may turn to body modification in

order to find an authentic, lasting self in the constantly changing, anything-goes hyperreality of postmodernity (Bell, 1999).

The postmodern turn has given Westerners the scripts needed to change their bodies and view the body as an unfinished entity that can be moulded in accordance with one's lifestyle (Shilling, 1993). As society has softened its views regarding the permissibility of modifying the body, various methods of altering one's body have become increasingly popular. Yet, growing numbers have not resulted in wholesale acceptance of body modification. While discreetly modified bodies may be desirable enough to be included in advertising campaigns (Kosut, 2006), visibly modified individuals face job discrimination and are likely to be taken for criminals or drug addicts (Kang and Jones, 2007: 46; Laumann and Derick, 2006: 420). The limited acceptability of (concealable) body modifications has allowed visible modifications to continue to serve as symbols of subcultural otherness.

The Subcultural Approach

Sociologists have long been interested in the otherness of non-normative groups. While the most basic principles of group relations *can* be used to understand such complex phenomena as race relations (Blumer, 1958), the understanding of more specialised types of group forms often calls for a more theoretically developed concept. One concept developed by scholars seeking to understand non-normative groups that actively reject (at least some aspects of) society is subculture. Subculture is a term that it is often used, yet seldom defined, resulting in a term that means many things to many scholars (Bennett, 1999; Small et al., 2010).

Accordingly, it is important to provide a working definition. For the purposes of this article, a subculture is a group whose social distance from the larger society is influenced by social structure (e.g. social class) and whose members are committed to it as a long-term primary group (Blackman, 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). While the validity of subculture as a framework for understanding non-normative groups has been challenged in recent decades, I

will provide support for the continued use of a subcultural approach in the tradition of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

Subcultural research is rooted in the writings of the Chicago School (Williams, 2007), with deviant groups often being analyzed by early subcultural theorists seeking to understand the manner in which the working class attempted to meet society's standards in the face of negative social conditions (Bennett, 1999: 600; Cohen, 1955). The greatest influence on the development (and later criticism) of subcultural theory, however, was the emergence of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham in the 1960s (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). Given the time period in which the CCCS came to prominence, its scholars were primarily concerned with working class and youth subcultures in post-War Britain (Clarke et al., 2005). According to the CCCS' conceptualisation, subcultures offer individuals 'a different cultural response or "solution" to the problems posed for them by their material and social class position and experience' (Clarke et al., 2005: 95).

If a subculture is a response to unfavourable conditions created by social structures within the larger culture, the question becomes, how does the subculture issue its response? The subculture's solution, and the subcultural theorist's primary unit of analysis, is style (Hebdige, 1979). Style is more than meaningless superficialities; it is the manner in which a subculture utilises symbols to display dissatisfaction with the mainstream culture. The style that a subculture invokes includes borrowed objects already widely used within the mainstream. In borrowing from the superordinate culture, subculture members make illegitimate use of otherwise legitimate objects (Hebdige, 1979). Since a subculture's style is meant to deliver a message to the broader public and help clarify group boundaries, it is critical that the symbols used stem 'from within the matrix of the existent' so that mainstream individuals can recognise the subculture's desire to alter society through altered objects

(Clarke, 2006: 150). Developing and using symbols that have no relation to mainstream culture would risk the possibility that others would not know one is challenging larger cultural structures.

Style is often prominently displayed in leisure spaces. A subculture's style, however, is not strictly limited to leisure spaces and activities. Rather, it is in a leisure setting that style can be most readily observed (Clarke, 2006). For John Clarke and other CCCS scholars, the emphasis on leisure was justified by the fact that the subcultures of interest emerged from the working class, which emphasised leisure as a cherished opportunity to enjoy otherwise nonexistent personal freedom. Not only was leisure important to the working class as a whole, its importance to the youthful subculture members of interest was heightened by their understanding of adolescence 'as a time of relative indulgence and freedom before adult responsibilities set in' (Clarke, 2006: 148). Leisure spaces are those where subcultural youth have the opportunity to create and express style, thereby making those spaces most vital in the study of subculture (Thornton, 2005).

Subcultural theorists have been primarily interested in the moment a new style emerges. For, '[t]his is the moment when activities, practices, outlooks *crystallise around* certain very limited and coherent expressive forms' (Clarke, 2006: 148; emphasis in the original). More recently, scholars have called for a change to this initial approach, suggesting that:

the subcultures are treated as static and rigid anthropological entities when in fact such reified and pure subcultures exist only at the Centre's level of abstraction which seeks to explain subcultures in terms of their genesis. Hence, there is an uncomfortable absence in the literature of any discussion as to how and with what consequences the pure subcultures are sustained, transformed, appropriated, disfigured, or destroyed. (McRobbie, 1994: 69)

McRobbie's call for a more thorough analysis of how subcultures are lived and redefined after the period of initiation is an important one. It should be noted, however, that CCCS scholarship was not wholly restricted to the genesis of subcultures. Willis (1978), for

example, contrasted the sustainability of bikeboy and hippy cultures. The bikeboys' reluctance to expand into non-leisure spaces ultimately led to the group's downfall. Hippies, on the other hand, were able to maintain their culture for a greater period by expanding cultural practices into work and family lives. Likewise, Hodkinson (2013) has shown that subcultural members still commit long-term in the postmodern era. He found that members of the Goth subculture may decrease their cultural distance from the mainstream by embracing hegemonic family relationships in adulthood. Though this may seem to weaken group boundaries, it has actually permitted adult Goths the opportunity to redefine and maintain their subcultural membership beyond adolescence.

Style has been both a preferred point of analysis for researchers and a method of differentiation for subculture members. There are, however, other aspects to subcultures that should be and have been analyzed. Clarke (2006: 152) showed that actions of skinheads enhanced the distinction between them and hippies already expressed through style:

a further point about the subculture's relation to different outgroups — their reaction against certain groups does not necessarily manifest itself primarily in the symbolic aspects of the style (clothing, music, etc.), but must be looked for in the whole range of activities, contexts, and objects which together constitute their stylistic ensemble. Thus, the Skinhead reaction against Hippies is not solely manifested in their opposed dress and hair styles, but in the physical assaults on Hippies.

Similar to their attacks on hippies, skinheads have also attacked other groups they opposed, e.g. 'paki-bashing' of immigrants (Pearson, 1976). The mass-dancers, who attended rigidly-planned dances in large British halls throughout much of the twentieth century, provide another example of a youth culture not limited by style. In addition to promoting a fancier style, mass-dancers purposefully selected more expensive venues for their dances once popularity increased. Subsequently, it was understood that the working class youth were unwanted within this group (Mungham, 1976).

Diversifying the manner in which a subculture distinguishes itself from the mainstream culture and other subcultures is crucial, as subcultures based solely on style are

likely to crumble. Willis (1978: 176) found that a culture ultimately contributes to its own dissolution when style serves as its lone challenge to mainstream culture:

If their cultures were basically a matter of style, then no matter what they expressed or implied they could be taken as just that: style which could be generalized, torn from its precise contextual meaning, and used to generate further demand for the culture and consciousness consumer industries... If it is to even maintain its own existence, never mind its subversion into complex forms of its opposite, the detailed dialectics of cultural transformation and personal liberation must also stretch to a dialectic with political and material structures.

Ironically, the objects subcultures take from the superordinate culture often gain popularity among the mainstream in their altered form. Thornton has suggested that one of the greatest problems facing a subculture is the popularisation of its style via a 'gushing up to the mainstream' (2005: 191). If a subculture's only method of distinction is style and that style is (re)claimed by the mainstream, then the subculture must seek new objects and techniques to incorporate into their existence or face extinction. Mundane changes in technology, markets and occupational careers permit the production of new cultural forms (Peterson and Anand, 2004), and these changes may prevent a subculture's collapse. The ability of a subculture to develop a career system, for example, can lend structure and gatekeepers that help sustain the production of the culture.

Critiquing Subculture

The existence of subcultures has been widely accepted by laypeople, but scholars have been more selective in using this label (Robards and Bennett, 2011). The emergence of postmodernism has forced many subculture scholars to reconceptualise their work, creating a debate about subculture's theoretical relevance. Two concepts often used by scholars rejecting the subculture approach are (neo-)tribe and scene. These 'post-subculture' approaches conceptualise groups of interest in terms of a loose collection of moments or events, not a structured subculture. Contrary to criticism from post-subcultural scholars (Bennett, 1999: 602), subculturalists have not always presented subcultures as rigid, permanent collections

with strictly uniform styles. From its inception, CCCS scholarship recognised that subcultures can and do have flexible boundaries and potentially limited lifespans (Clarke et al., 2005).

Others have also conceptualised subcultural identity as a fluid phenomenon (Fine and Kleinman, 1979).

Post-subculturalists also emphasise individual choices while minimising the importance of social structures (Bennett, 1999; Blackman, 2005: 15). Sociologists interested in punk and other music-based groupings, for example, have argued that the willingness and ability of group members to jump from one cultural group to another suggests that post-subcultural approaches are now most appropriate (Force, 2009; Hesmondhalgh, 2005). However, such critics overemphasise music, dance, and style, as if those were the only motivators for subcultural groups (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006). Moreover, they fail to recognise that such groups 'tend to be reserved for the more privileged sections of dominant cultural groups' (Shildrick and McDonald, 2006: 133), which possess the socioeconomic means to bounce from tribe to tribe or scene to scene.

Another criticism from post-subculturalists has been in response to the CCCS' emphasis on social class. According to Bennett (1999), subculture is no longer a viable concept, because contemporary 'subcultures' are not bound by social class. Yet, social class is merely one type of social structure. While post-subculturalists have criticised subcultural theorists for focusing on social class instead of race, gender, or age, they have failed to see that those, too, are social structures that shape one's social identity, life, and culture (Blackman, 2005; McRobbie, 1994; Thornton, 2005). Critics of the CCCS approach must recognise that class was so prevalent in early CCCS writings because of its particular importance in post-War Britain (Clarke, 1990). The primary point to be taken from CCCS' interest in social class is that social structures influence subcultural membership. Furthermore, social class remains a life-shaping structure across the West, despite evolving characteristics that complicate old labels (Adair, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Standing, 2011). The working class

that was the focus of CCCS scholarship may now be a waning remnant of ‘an older generational formation’ (Savage et al., 2013: 240), but the characteristic lack of capital addressed by subculturalists continues to exist in less-advantaged classes.

Much of the criticism of the CCCS and subcultural theory, therefore, stems from a misinterpretation of early CCCS writings (Blackman, 2005). If subculture has been misapplied to numerous youth and music-based groupings, then the criticism regarding subcultures has been misdirected (Hesmondhalgh, 2005). The fact that subculture does not apply in all situations does not mean subculture should be dismissed as a sociological concept. Indeed, such mistakes warrant the criticism of those scholars misappropriating subculture, not subcultural theory. In contrast to notions of scenes or tribes, which present potentially exaggerated views of personal autonomy, subcultural theorists recognise the importance of social structures in the emergence of these groups, whether those structures are provided by class, race, gender, or some other social characteristic(s) (Blackman, 2005: 15).

Scenes and (neo-)tribes may be appropriate framing devices for some studies, but subculture remains a valuable concept (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006; Williams, 2007; Wilson and Atkinson, 2005), one I find most appropriate for this study. As I will show, most participants in this study are located within the precariat, an emergent social class-- most closely resembling traditional working class and poor categories-- characterised by precarious income and low social status (Standing, 2011). The conceptualisation of this new social class is still in its infancy-- some have noted its inattention to place and other social indicators (Banki, 2013; Vradi, 2013)-- but it is the class category that best describes participants. The social location of participants exhibits the inverse relationship between body modification and income, as well as education (Laumann and Derick, 2006), while challenging Bennett’s (1999) argument that social class is no longer a significant factor in the formation of potential subcultures. Seeing society through the prism of endless choices, postmodernists are not typically concerned with social divisions and inequality (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006), yet

such divisions are a reality for my participants. I argue, therefore, that social structures play an important role in the formation of the group discussed below, thereby upholding the work of subculturalists.

The Virtual Field

This article draws upon a qualitative analysis of the internet site ModMagazine.com³, or ModMag. ModMag is a site designed for those with an interest in body modifications-- including tattoos, piercings, brands, scarifications, and more extreme practices. According to the website, ModMag is comprised of 'the historians, practitioners and appreciators of body modification'. ModMag is comprised of several sections designed to support this mission, including photo galleries of site members and their modifications, stories about body modification experiences, and a body modification-themed wiki.

Linked to ModMag is an online community called ME, which is only accessible to registered users. In order to gain access to ME, individuals must submit pictures or stories of their own body modifications. For each submission, members receive site access for a set amount of time (e.g. one month for a picture of a nostril piercing). Alternatively, one may purchase a membership for a nominal fee (the cost for a six month membership is \$10). Many members disapprove of the fee option, despite management's claims that the money is needed for site maintenance. Regardless of how one obtains a membership, all members must have at least one body modification. This makes it possible to have both modified people and people with modifications on ME. The greatest strength of the selected data, however, is that it provided a centralised source of modified people. This group remains small in number, despite growing mainstream use of body modifications across the West (Laumann and Derick, 2006). While ME has users from across the globe, the vast majority come from Western cultures. There are, nonetheless, users from Brazil, Thailand, and the Pacific Islands who participate in traditional forms of body modification. Given the different meanings of body

modification in Western and non-Western societies (Turner, 1999; Van Dinter, 2005), only Westerners participating in non-compulsory forms thereof have been included in the study.

Similar to other social networking sites, ME allows users to customise their personal pages using HTML. Most pages include pictures of the member, a list of current and previous body modifications, links to friends, and a personal blog. There are also numerous forums hosted by users and administrators. Forums cover a wide variety of topics, including modification and non-modification issues. Lastly, there is a messaging function that allows members to privately contact each other. Using other ModMag sections sparingly, I concentrated on data available on ME.

Data Collection

As a member of ME since 2008, I had already gained entry to the community to be studied before becoming an 'insider researcher' (Hodkinson, 2005). My three year involvement helped with 'getting to know the particular norms and understandings of the group', a critical step in the analysis of participant actions (Kendall, 1999: 270). As noted by Hine, virtual ethnography is a composition of various (primarily) qualitative methodologies characterised by the researcher's ability to become 'embroiled in the setting' in order to gain deeper understanding (2000: 2). This contemporary application of ethnographic principles is rooted in the foundational work of the Chicago School, which stressed 'a first-hand experience with a phenomenon in order to achieve an intimate acquaintanceship with it' (Farber, 1988: 346).

Data for this article was gathered via participant observation and analyzed using content analysis, an effective and unobtrusive way for scholars to investigate presentations of the embodied self in online communities (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Ploderer et al., 2008; Wilson and Atkinson, 2005). I also used a limited number of informal online interviews with members of the (potential) body modification subculture to clarify unanswered questions stemming from blogs or forum postings that did not adequately address my research

questions. Similar to Taylor's (2010) use of interviews to strengthen participant observation, these five interviews served a limited and supplementary role. The final analysis is based upon data from 39 consenting users. All material posted on participants' pages between October 2010 and September 2011 was analysed, including over 2,000 posts and 2,000 photos.

Demographic Patterns

My participants consisted of 25 men and 14 women. The proportion of women in this study is lower than that found within the ME community, where they are a slight majority (Hicinbotham, 2007). Women have also made up roughly half of all individuals with modifications since the turn of the century (Fisher, 2002). Although it is possible that the smaller proportion of women in this study may have resulted from convenience sampling techniques, both this project and a previous study on body modification (Author A) lead me to suggest that women are less likely to actively participate in the body modification subculture than men.

In addition to gender, body modification and subcultural participation have been portrayed as youthful phenomena (Panconesi, 2007), and the majority of participants in this study (64%) were between the ages of 18 and 30. The percentage of participants over 30 years of age, however, was nearly double the percentage (19%) that could be expected based upon the overall composition of ME (Hicinbotham, 2007). It seems that participation in this subculture is not as strongly influenced by age as interest in body modification. Nor does age have a strong exclusionary role, as has been the case for other subcultures.

The inability of modified people to hide their subcultural markers from public view may be one factor contributing to continued participation in this subculture beyond one's youth. Punks could change their hairstyles and clothes as they aged, thereby enabling them to exchange their subcultural identity for an identity conforming to the mainstream. Modified

people, however, cannot remove their subculture's symbols. This 'ironic' characteristic of body modification (Kosut, 2006) explains why modified people continue to be modified beyond their youth, but it does not explain why they remain active subculture members. Similar to Willis' (1978) hippy culture, the ability of this group of body modifiers to keep older members within the ranks seems to result from its expansion beyond leisure spaces. Namely, the subculture has created alternative work opportunities permitting those with familial responsibilities to remain active in the subculture while navigating various mainstream expectations. Many participants, for example, were employed by tattoo and piercing studios, including 23 piercers (five of whom retired from the industry) and five tattoo artists (one of whom retired).

Employment

Given the group demographics, many found themselves in a phase of life where seeking employment was a top priority. Some participants were specifically seeking piercing or tattooing apprenticeships. RocknRollMelissa spent years searching for an apprenticeship, leading to the following post when a position became available:

The piercer I have been waiting to contact me JUST DID! I'm so nervous to call him back!! He wants to know my schedule and inquire about other things! SO EXCITED RIGHT NOW!!!!!!!!!! :D

RocknRollMelissa's excitement over an apprenticeship resulted not only from the fact that she would be able to work in a field she is passionate about, but that she would be securing a job that permitted visible modifications. Marvin, who has been piercing in shops across the US for more than a decade, mirrored RocknRollMelissa's sentiment when he stated that he would 'refuse to do anything else except work in the piercing industry. It is truly my dream job'.

For RocknRollMelissa and others, the desire to work in a tattoo studio was related to the fact that those who were not employed within the body modification industry struggled to

find work. Eight of the participants not working in tattoo studios were unemployed for at least some portion of the study, including Corey:

So all I need to do...get through the weekend....and get through next week....and figure out a way to have money....fuck...I hit a snafu...I need 20 bucks to make it to Thursday and its not happening....shit...35 counting phone time....I'm running out of things to sell and trade....can you say scared and frustrated????

While I cannot comment on the types of employment Corey was seeking, his heavily tattooed face may have impacted his inability to find work. To make ends meet, Corey turned to bartering, but that is not always a viable option for one's responsibilities in a capitalist society. Unable to barter for rent, he considered bartering for an automobile he could sleep in. With his extremely poor economic capital and insecure housing, Corey typifies the precariat (Savage et al., 2013).

Other unemployed participants, such as Jamie, occasionally discussed the negative influence visible modifications had on their employment prospects:

[I] just updated my resume and am excited/scared shitless at the prospect of getting a job and getting off disability... I'm going to apply at everything from music stores to pharmacies to bakeries to tattoo shops to receptionist jobs to cashiers to whatthefuckever... i have my throat and knuckles tattooed, so that may be a "dress code" challenge/turn-off for some close minded, discriminatory places... and i have 1-1/4" lobes (that i never wear jewellery in but will if that's more "appealing") and facial piercings... oh, the challenges of being modified in a small town... fuck it, i can rock that shit... i'm a really good person and a REALLY hard worker... too bad i can't pierce anymore due to severe shaking hands... but i can't dwell on that "loss"... i have to move on with my life... i deserve more than this

After being forced into early retirement from the piercing industry as a result of her health, Jamie spent several years without a job and was still unemployed at the conclusion of the study. Her story exemplifies the importance of being employed in the body modification industry for members of this subculture.

The relationship between unemployment and visible modifications begs the question of whether unemployment leads to visible modifications or vice versa. Given that many of the participants began collecting tattoos and piercings before reaching a working age, it is likely that their modifications induced employment struggles. It is unlikely that participants turned

to visible modifications in an attempt to alleviate the socio-psychological problems stemming from unemployment. This argument is supported by Kang and Jones' (2007) findings suggesting that visible modifications negatively affect one's employability.

Social Class

While unemployment may not have preceded participation in this subculture, it is possible that membership in the precariat influenced this participation, as few participants had middle class roots or aspirations. In contrast to the larger ME community, in which half of all users had a college education and one-third were currently enrolled students (DiPopolo, 2010), only one of the study's participants was enrolled in college, and two had a four year degree. Since participants were more heavily modified than the larger ME community, these findings support claims of an inverse relationship between body modification and education (Laumann and Derick, 2006: 415). As a result of their lower education levels, employed participants who did not work in tattoo shops typically had low-wage, low-prestige jobs.

Financial stress was a common theme in participants' blogs. Fifteen of the 19 participants who discussed financial struggles were not employed by a tattoo shop at the time, suggesting that financial security among the subculture's members correlates to one's ability to work as a piercer or tattoo artist. Mosaic is an auto mechanic who discussed the lack of financial security provided by his job:

Got my direct deposit last night while I slept. \$702 for 2 weeks of work. My rent is \$699. So after I pay rent I have \$3 left for food. And \$0 to pay the bills I am already behind on. I am pretty sure I HAVE to quit my job and seek a new one.

Mosaic posted similar entries in the months leading up to the above quote. Like others in the precariat, his fluctuating income and lack of savings caused him to live in anxiety (Standing, 2011). As the study concluded, he was looking into government assistance programs and attempting to sell a car he had been rebuilding for a decade.

While seemingly in a better financial situation than their counterparts who were not employed in the body modification industry, some piercers and tattoo artists also discussed financial strains stemming from the seasonal nature of the body modification industry. Jennifer4you expressed her frustration in a November entry, exclaiming 'I'm so tired [of being financially unstable]'. Customers are less likely to be tattooed or pierced in late Fall and early Winter than they are in Spring or early Summer, thereby affecting the pay cheques of tattooists and piercers who have no base salary. For T-Bone, a piercer in a large Midwestern city, this was a repeated source of frustration: 'Well, so far I've made almost 4x as much money in the past two days than I did all last week. I definitely have a love-hate relationship with commission based work'. The previous week, this same individual lamented, 'Made \$70 last week....fuck'. Despite seasonal flux and inconsistent incomes, tattoo shop employees were among the most financially stable participants.

In addition to supporting the claim that this group is a subculture, the financial demographics reveal a dilemma for participants, as excess income is typically required in order to receive new body modifications. Often unable or unwilling to find better paying jobs, many participants were forced to seek alternative measures to maintain subcultural authenticity, a constantly moving target (Force, 2009: 305). Since members maintained their subcultural status beyond adolescence, it is important here to differentiate between this subculture and youth subcultures characterised by excessive free time and expendable incomes.

In contrast to exclusively youthful subcultures, participants had greater economic and personal responsibilities, limiting their opportunities to frivolously spend money on new modifications. They expressed an awareness of the financial struggles they would encounter while directing their money towards body modification. As Corey discussed his future plans, he acknowledged the existence of 'financial [structures] that complicate it all that much further'. Mosaic also mentioned the need to sacrifice and save for new modifications, noting

'My desire to get tattooed has been growing greatly. This is now in direct conflict with my "budget" goal. Sigh'. Rather than exhibiting poor money management skills, I argue members of this subculture willingly tolerated continued financial strain in order to meet subcultural expectations. Indeed, none of those facing economic hardships claimed to regret their modifications, nor did anyone express a desire to remove their visible modifications in hopes of securing better-paying employment.

Some participants also attempted to find alternatives to traditional capitalist practices (e.g. paying full price for a tattoo shop's services) while furthering their collection of body modifications. Such participants traded in on their subcultural capital in order to receive new modifications at no cost. Corey and Jamie, for example, bartered for facial tattoos. Were it not for her long history within the subculture, it is unlikely Jamie would have been permitted to 'pay' for a tattoo with homemade cupcakes. Several participants who worked in tattoo shops noted receiving body modifications from and/or performing modifications on co-workers at no expense. The complimentary performance of body modification between professional modification artists not only enabled members to strengthen their subcultural capital, it was also seen as an honour to be able to modify the body of another professional artist within the subculture.

Discussion and Conclusions

The demographic observations presented here reveal the relevance of the subculturalist approach for a study on this collection of modified individuals. Contrary to post-subculturalist scholarship that rejects the role of class in subcultural formation, I found a link between social class and membership in this body modification subculture. Whereas the larger ME community may include users from all social classes, the dearth of middle and upper class individuals among the site's heavily modified population causes one to question post-subculturalist claims that subculture has been rendered an untenable concept as a result of the

disappearing relationship between contemporary 'subcultures' and social class (Bennett, 1999). According to my findings, (at least some) groups rejecting the mainstream continue to be formed along social class lines. This body modification subculture, then, more closely resembles the mass-dancers and punks in post-War Britain than the various neo-tribes of the late twentieth century.

One indicator of social class cited above is education level. Compared to the broader ME community, participants were less likely to have attended college. Another indicator I have cited is the unemployment rate. During the year for which data was collected, the unemployment rate for this group was more than twice the rates of Australia⁴, Canada⁵, the UK⁶ and the USA⁷, the countries in which most participants resided. Another indicator of class was type of employment. Participants were most often employed within the body modification trades. Some were also employed in other low-status jobs, including auto mechanic and factory line worker. The final indicator of social class is financial status. In addition to having backgrounds similar to the CCCS' working class subjects, many members struggled to make ends meet. This is the weakest of the four indicators, as similar phenomena may also be observed among middle and upper class individuals who overspend (Frank, 2001). I suggest, however, that low-wage jobs are the source of economic frustration, as the data collected do not indicate that participants were leading themselves into financial hardships by living above their means. I have shown that modifications, at least among the heavily modified, may contribute to unemployment and financial struggles. In addition to displaying the subculture's desire to remain a distinct group, this exposes the mainstream's unwillingness to fully accept body modification.

The process of modifying one's body is viewed as long-term within this subculture, and many participants spoke of their future modification plans. In contrast to post-subculturalist scenes for which age plays a restrictive role, the data do not indicate that the subculture conforms to a rigid age range. The scene approach may, however, be more

applicable for the broader ME community, as its participation rate for individuals over thirty is roughly half that found among study participants. One of the factors enabling members to remain active in the subculture beyond their youth is the subculture's ability to mimic the hippy culture and create alternative work structures. Many members of the body modification subculture are able to find work in tattoo and piercing studios, and this allows body modification to permeate their lives. Moreover, the financial well-being of shop employees contributes to the sustainability of the subculture by allowing members to remain active beyond their youth.

Interestingly, the often-criticised mainstream people with modifications enabled industry workers with familial and financial responsibilities to remain active within the subculture beyond the leisure-filled life phase to which many youth cultures are confined (Willis, 1978). Non-industry workers with little education, on the other hand, were susceptible to legalised discrimination and unemployment. Rather than simply staying in the subculture because their permanent and visible modifications depleted alternatives, I argue that such participants willingly accepted further financial struggles in order to participate in their community's rituals. Participants discussed a failed sense of belonging elsewhere, and I suggest they took on the hardships associated with these rituals as a marker or rite of belonging.

Participants' disdain for the larger culture was palpable, but their need for group membership was a predominate factor in their decision to join and stay in this subculture. Participants' determination to stay active in the group while facing hardships exhibits the lasting nature of the group, indicating the existence of a subculture, not a neo-tribe or scene. While the existence of a contemporary body modification subculture does not mean scenes and tribes will lose their relevance as theoretical concepts, it does reveal the need for scholars to reassess the theoretical pre-eminence of post-subculturalism.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/mid/1508/articleId/970/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/Default.aspx>
- 2 Gauge is a unit of measurement for the diameter of needles and jewellery, where smaller gauges indicate larger diameters (e.g. 18ga = 1.024mm; 12ga = 2.053mm).
- 3 Website/user names have been changed to assure confidentiality of participants. Information from blogs and interviews, however, is presented with few, if any, edits to maintain the discourse in its 'natural' setting.
- 4 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6202.0>
- 5 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/subjects-sujets/labour-travail/lfs-epa/lfs-epa-eng.htm>
- 6 <http://www.hrmguide.co.uk/jobmarket/unemployment.htm>
- 7 <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>

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