Perceptions of Subversion:

The Formation of a Pop-Subculture

by

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Abstract

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This project seeks to examine the emerging cultural significance of the modern hipster and determine their contribution to the greater discourse of counter-cultural formations of subversion and identity. Hipsters are depicted as and expected to live life and form tastes using irony. They come to represent the insincerity and lack of authenticity of a group that builds its identity using material representations of previous generations. Their use of irony comes to shape how they interact with each other and with mainstream society, which surrounds them. Whether reinforcing sexism through the use of ironic rhetoric or questioning dominant culture, irony plays a distinctive role in how hipsters are perceived.

The second chapter explores how identities are formed within hipster culture. I analyze modes of acceptance in *Its Kind of a Funny Story, Skins* and *Girls* in an attempt to demonstrate hipsterdom's connection to dominant cultural positions of social class and patriachal hegemonies of sex, sexuality and gender.

The final chapter analyzes the role of consumerism within hipster subversion. I delve into how mass markets have capitalized on hipster aesthetic, leading to a dilution of the subculture's subversive capabilities. From the outset it would appear that because of

all of the mitigating circumstances that serve to recycle hipster identities back into a

dominant, mainstream societal fold that hipsterdom offers littler in the way of affecting

social change. On the contrary, the hipster contribution to society represent a complex

interplay between a subculture's ability to simulatneously exist within and outside the

dominant order.

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Introduction

    They're in coffee shops and bookstores. They ride fixed gear bikes and don't eat
meat. They listen to slow melodic music, major in the arts and dress as if they were
living in previous decades. If a young person exhibits any of these stereotypes,
mainstream society may define them as hipster. In the popularized and recycled
depictions of millennial hipsters, these stereotypes come to symbolize modern youth
subcultures and are used to produce an image through which dominant culture can
capitalize upon and curtail subcultural subversion. In part, mainstream society
interprets hipsters as hollow consumers, because they actively isolate and police what
constitutes the hip and counter of their culture. The desire to uniquely "fit in" with tightly
controlled subcultural trends has graduated to "a point in our civilization where
counterculture has mutated into a self-obsessed aesthetic vacuum. So while
hipsterdom is the end product of all prior countercultures, it has been stripped of its
subversion and originality" (Haddow). Douglass Haddow recognizes a moment in
Western society where counter-culture is losing its ability to effectively differentiate from
the consumerist habits of its elders. But, hipster identities represent a movment within
the current cultural moment where recycled consumption and subversive change can
occur simultaneously. Their identity, or lack thereof, is a product of all that came before
them and the cultures in which they were nurtured. They've become "a lost generation,
desperately clinging to anything that feels real, but too afraid to become it [themselves]"
(Haddow) embody the complexity of a digitally written body, which is constantly
bombarded by cultural signs of the past ready made for consumption. Born in a digitally
pervasive age, they are constantly consuming and being consumed by the relics of
counter-cultures past that are now imprinted on the world-wide zeitgeist. Grandchildren
of a rebellious generation, they attempt to subvert the commercial age of their parents.

The greater sum of these parts cannot be categorized as subversive, capitalist or conformist. Hipsters are an amalgamation of every movement, authentic or insincere, that came before them. They are as obsessed with their own self-image as they are bringing about change. Their seemingly selfish consumption and social presence builds upon a uniquely 21st century problem. In an age of hyper-individualism, does joining a movement that somewhat resembles recursive change (the generational desire to oppose and transcend the previous one) lead to actual change, or is hipsterdom an expression of individualized vanity indicating the commodification of subversion?

Through an investigation of fictional and cultural depictions of what can be considered hipster culture, I will show that hipster culture has come to signify a shift in how cultural identities are formed. Hipsterdom's presence and importance within the early 21st century cultural zeitgeist directly correlates with hipsters' ability to consume, interpret, and reimagine the signs of cultures past, present, and future. I intend to demonstrate hipsterdom's obligation to both a manufactured cultural identity, representing an either sincere or insincere pastiche of modern society, and their cooption into a new method of capitalism. Being an amalgamation of mainstream society and the desire to separate from it, hipsterdom exists as a sub-culture squarely in control of shaping the present cultural moment. The hipster comes to signify a culmination of past alternative ideologies, while at the same time mirroring the sexism, decadence, and commercialization within mainstream society. Their social dualism calls into question some of the more traditional notions of individual and social identification, allowing them to become alternative while at the same time highlighting their connectivity to social and sexual hierarchies. In order to articulate this point, I will primarily examine television, cinematic, and commercial depictions of hipster culture. The shows *Girls* and the American version of *Skins*, as well as the film *It's Kind of A*

Funny Story represent how pop symbols of hipsters simultaneously operate as mirrors and windows into so-called real-world iterations, or mainstream interpretations of what it means to be hipster. Using several themes from these and other primary examples, I delve into a cultural studies exploration of the culture and its influence in shifting how cultural and material artifacts representing hipsters are created and consumed.

Taken at face value, "hipster" is a loaded term, with unstable backing and constantly shifting definitions and characteristics. What people consider as hipster differs from state to state, city to city. Unlike goth, hippie, or any other subculture, hipsters do not attempt to differentiate as a group. These once "popular" groups gained solidarity in shared, easily identifiable features. They dressed alike and shared a set of values, which made meeting similarly minded youths easier. Hipster, on the other hand, operates as a broad group of individuality. Part beatnik, hippie and millennial, "the hipster isn't necessarily about finding other likeminded souls out there. It's more about expressing yourself and doing your own thing, no matter how wild that may appear to others" (Sophy Bot). A multiplicity of aesthetics can be called "hipster," but the basis for the idea of hipster follow strict forms of individuality. Just as in previous subcultures, there are certain physical characteristics that make up what people "perceive" as hipster. When thinking of hipsters, images of vintage clothes come to mind; young men and women adorned in denim and flannel with skinny pants and knit hats. Guys don handlebar mustaches and girls wear leggings, while both sport ironic or retro t-shirts (figure 1.1). These hipster stereotypes merely scratch the surface of the complexity of hipster identity. Hipster fashion trends and political ideologies build upon constantly shifting competitions of individualistic bouts of one-upmanship, in which to the most individual (those who appear as furthest away from dominant cultural aesthetics and ideology) goes the spoils. Within this constant competition, as with other subcultures,

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there are certain rules. Most importantly, everything "mainstream" is to be avoided at all cost, everything else is fair game. Second-hand clothing and unique styles separate hipster from "popular" culture and classify them as "rebels." But, this group of trend rebels risks becoming the trendsetters and building a new "mainstream." To sum up the contradiction – the borderline hypocrisy of the hipster -- hipsters portray that "the whole point of hipsters is [to] avoid labels and being labeled. However, they all dress the same and act the same and conform in their non-conformity" (Plevin). Hip, modern retailers (American Apparel, Urban Outfitters) sell hipster style. No longer is the style limited to the individual. Wearing vintage-looking clothing in the vein of hipster has become a commodity. What was once a fashion statement against major retail and a show of unique individuality has become a commercial entity. In many ways the story and "corruption" of hipsterdom follows the paths and ideas set forth by those originally called hipsters in the 1940s.

Figure 1.1: Hipsters.

It started with Marlon, Jack and Jim. These three men (Jack Kerouac, James Dean and Marlon Brando) helped introduce counter-culture to the masses. They reflected and inspired a generation of young men and women. Their rebellion became a mode of self-expression. Their influence birthed a generation of counter-culturists acting against oppressive forces that limited social progress. The culture began in the forties at a transitional period in the U.S. The country was a couple of generations removed from the Civil War and two World Wars were fought where black and white young men both suffered tragedy. Life as they understood it was expanded, globally, exponentially. Radio and motion pictures allowed for greater exposure between cultures. It would seem only natural that the new generation, born in the wake of the Great War, would embrace different cultures that generations before them were unaware existed.

By identifying outside their *first* culture, hipsters positioned their existential existence in a manner that coincides with literary theorist Kenneth Burke's model of consubstantial identification. Burke claims that when one entity (A) identifies with a colleague (B), "A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (Burke 180). The shared turmoil in which hipsters were raised, the constant fear of instant atomic death, necessitated a search for meaning and purpose. Through their embracing of a culture second to their own, the hipster simultaneously became one with his or her colleague, while maintaining the dominant social standing afforded to them by their birthright. In their case, identifying with the Other marked them as purveyors of social fluidity and taste. Black culture became a source for identification for white hipsters and because of their distinct identity as consuming outsider, not wholly belonging to, but indeterminately

dependent on their black peers, the aesthetic that they created become a site for mainstream culture to consume and market.

Arguably the strongest and longest lasting affect of the first hipster movement is not a set of ideology or political change, but a pair of jeans. Originally conceived and marketed as "working man" jeans, Levi's slowly became the jeans of a generation. For the James Dean classic *Rebel Without a Cause* the wardrobe department laundered 400 pairs of Levi 501s[1] ("The 'Rebel Without a Cause' Curse"). Jeans were in. Hollywood recognized the shifting popularity of rugged jeans for rural workingmen to trendy urban fashion statements. Jeans were associated with rebels and an expression of an accumulation of teen angst. When translated to the silver screen, the symbols of youth rebellion, Brando, Dean, etc., were idolized for creating an outlet for youth expression. But, when reflecting upon the troubled Jim Stark, or the rebellious Johnny Strabler, their aesthetic image may be the first thing that comes to mind. Dean's red jacket and jeans, Brando's double-breasted leather jacket and jeans, are just as much a part of the cultural zeitgeist as their character's actions. Their contributions to counter-culture stood firmly in the camps of new Hollywood and the fashion industry. Ali Bayse relates that one of Dean's costars observed that after *Rebel's* release "she would drive by her old high school and all the boys hanging out in front would have on [Dean's] red jacket" (Bayse). It wasn't enough to be the part or share similar beliefs and customs, teens had to look the part as well. The look of a movement became a fashion trend. Clothing manufacturers tailored their marketing and products in order to capitalize on the counter-cultural boom. The cultural artifacts left behind by these films had as much to do with rebellion as they

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[1] Dean, a Levi's wearer, wore Lee 101 Riders in the film.

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did with creating a new fashion, which was quickly consumed by rebels and "squares" alike.

The failings and triumphs of our modern hipsters don't stray as far from their forbearers as detractors believe. Our current counter-culture was born through tragedy as well, as a generation of adolescents coped with the aftermath of 9-11. They've "found" themselves in an age of faceless, hidden fear. Their nightmares revolve around what can only be described as senseless violence and disregard for human life. They've grown up in an age where tangible cultural artifacts are disappearing and being replaced by digital replicas, which can be cheaply and more easily disseminated to a youth desperately searching for meaning from the past, because they see no meaning in theirs. Consequently, the manners in which hipsters form identities, whether representing practiced commoditization or subversive change, and have built a subculture on the foundations of previous subversive iterations of alternative culture leads to a new form of agency, which is not without negative cultural connotations, where hipster affectively represent a change that is occurring in how cultural symbols are consumed and built into subcultural forms of subversion.

Chapter 1

Ironic Living: Shallow Identifications

A trait that has come to define how hipsters are interpreted is the casual display of insincere (possibly derogatory) behavior and cultural goods under the guise of irony. It could be the ways they dress, the music they listen to or the manner in which they treat others, but before hipsters can mold an identity, they must perform a self-critique of their tastes. Hipsters creatively collect archaeological artifacts of culture yet to be discovered (or they are forgotten), consuming facts and aesthetics for the sake of individualization, but their social consumption and material aesthetic can often venture into ironic representations of "self." Irony maintains a buffer, which someone casts upon his or her self to deflect social mockery through a separation from the exposure required by sincerity. In some instances irony is utilized as a means for men to use sexist rhetoric and to be misogynistic free of criticism, because they do not view themselves as sexist and they are only acting as such in order to criticize or distance themselves form so-called actual sexism. Christy Wampole claims that as a narrative character the hipster comes to be defined as "a walking citation; his clothes refer to much more than themselves. He tries to negotiate the age-old problem of individuality, not with concepts, but with material things" (Wampole). This helps to produce popular characterizations of hipsters as selfish, portraying their social criticisms as devolved forms of crude denigrations, or insincere gestures, which creates an environment where rhetoric and cultural goods are used ironically to mask an individual's own faults or highlight the faults of another.

Skins helped define the hipster television medium. Originally airing on E4 in the U.K. with an all-British cast, *Skins* was adapted for U.S. television and capitalized on the

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image of the hipster in America. Rife with irony, the U.S. version of *Skins*

counterbalances shallow aesthetic tastes and authenticity. *Skins* follows the lives of a

group of friends as they navigate the social scenes of school, family, and personal

relationships. Tony and his followers visibly act, dress and think differently than other

students–at least that's what we're led to believe. By all accounts these youths represent

hipsterdom insomuch that they strive to appear as differing from "mainstream" or "normal"

culture, a fact that defines their social decisions, retro musical tastes, fashion and apathy

toward school and any semblance of responsibility. As the show progress throughout the

first and final season, the group's shallow sensibilities become increasingly evident as an

aesthetic appearance, masking the stress of social and sexual pressure and the need to

belong.

Often, viewers of Skins may not be able to discern characters' motives, because

their sentiments and tastes are portrayed as insincere, as a precept of maintaining an

appearance. In the first scene of the first episode, viewers are introduced to the epitome

of hipster irony, Tony. Tony lives with his parents and willfully mute sister, Eura. Tony's

introduction opens with a bleak, dreary setting. The streets are covered in snow and

clouds shroud the sky. Tony lies wide awake in bed before his alarm goes off, beginning

a boxing-themed workout regimen after he rises. Nothing about Tony's life stands out as

particularly ironic during his morning routine until the scene shifts to Tony sitting on the

toilet reading a copy of *Know Your Rodent* by Ziggy Hanaor and illustrated by Thibaud

Herem. It's a small moment, but the presence of this book provides a greater glimpse into

the character. Rodentologist or not, *Know Your Rodent* is a fun and kitsch taxonomy of

various rodents. The book's primary audience is mostly children, not seventeen-year-old

males. When juxtaposed against Tony as presented in the British version of the show,

who in this same scene is reading *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist look into

the life of a dejected historian searching for meaning, the vastly different bathroom literary choices establishes the American Tony's lack of, or fear of demonstrating, intellectual substance, lending credence to the book's insincere ironic function. Tony may or may not be a rodentphile (he demonstrates little interest in animals of any type, aside from his reading of this book), but his reading of the book aligns with a stereotype of hipsters consuming the kitsch, the in-poor-taste materials of culture as a means of taking insincere positions in regard to particular cultural artifacts and keeping oneself at a distance from ridicule.

Know Your Rodent does not directly implicate Tony as living a completely ironic lifestyle, but it begins a series of cultural consumptions that build the character of Tony through material objects rather than expressions of sincere representations of personal ideologies, emotions and preferences. Christy Wampole describes hipster irony as belonging to the trend of ironic living, which:

> bespeaks cultural numbness, resignation and defeat. If life has become merely a clutter of kitsch objects, an endless series of sarcastic jokes and pop references, a competition to see who can care the least (or, at minimum, a performance of such a competition). (Wampole)

For Tony, his numbness manifests in keeping everything and everyone at arms length. Intellectually, he consumes kitsch (particularly in comparison to his British counterpart), in terms of fashion he dresses in vintage clothing (separating himself from the *now* of society, see figure 1.2). Material objects and shallow one-sided relationships define Tony more so than an authentic set of beliefs and emotions.

Figure 1.2: Tony's attire, which has a distinctly vintage feel

Irony serves a specific function for Tony in that his aesthetic and verbal ironies are used to distance and shield him from dealing with his true emotions. Linda Hutcheon states that as a literary technique, irony's use of "distance can, of course suggest the non-committal, the inferred refusal of engagement and involvement, and so its more pejorative associates are with indifference" (47). Tony uses irony and consumes retro music and clothing to distance himself from the now. Any affective connection he has with his material goods or his friendships are represented through cynicism or indifference with respect to the how his actions affect those around him. For Tony, his emotional distance and his eventual social exclusion supports Hutcheon's notion that "to see irony's workings a self-protective is to suggest that irony can be interpreted as a kind of defense mechanism" (47). Tony is emotionally lost and surrounds himself with

disingenuous symbols in order to protect him from the strain of dealing with his emotion pain. Tony's problem becomes apparent when his unrequited love for his lesbian friend Tea is revealed. Tony's inability to express the emotions he has for her leads him to only admit to his sexual attraction to her. Instead of dealing with his emotions, Tony uses irony and indifference as barriers, distancing himself from the possible rejection that would come from expressing his love for someone who will never love him back. In turn, Tony's constant consumption of hollow and meaningless relationships and goods presents his life as lacking substantial meaning.

In accordance with living ironically, Tony's entire life revolves around a lack of substance. Constantly on the phone or texting, Tony belongs to a generation raised in a digital world, where in spite of certain advantages, other skill sets have suffered: "the art of conversation, the art of looking at people, the art of being seen, the art of being present. Our conduct is no longer governed by subtlety, finesse, grace and attention, all qualities more esteemed in earlier decades. Inwardness and narcissism now hold sway" (Wampole). Tony's first interaction with his friends begins on the phone where his primary topic of conversation is helping his friend Stanley lose his virginity. Otherwise, "he and [Tony] can no longer be friends" (*Skins*, "Tony"). A self-serving attitude drives Tony's interactions with his circle of friends. Stanley seems uncomfortable with the idea of his first sexual encounter being arranged, but Tony's need for the loss of Stanley's virginity plays heavily into how he defines himself. Everything revolves around how those around him can serve his desires and maintain his appearance. Devoid of any substantial relationships, Tony manipulates those around him, amounting to the hipster generation's inwardness and narcissism of which Wampole speaks. In this same scene, the other members of the group are introduced in isolation; as Tony switches from one call to another, each shot cuts to one of the characters partaking in their "interests:" Stanley

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lying in bed surrounded by porn, Michelle primping in the bathroom, Tina practicing the Trumpet, Chris having sex, and Abbud thinking about lesbians whilst performing morning prayers. Visually isolating the characters distinguishes them all as individuals; they all consume and behave differently, but they all tie into, or back, to Tony (as he is the one who began the call). Within one phone call, the *Skins* characters are, for the most part, isolated as individuals lacking any identifying qualities outside of shallow self-indulgences.

To say hipsters completely lack substance denigrates their social value. In certain hipster texts, shows or films, the characters exhibit deep personal struggles with regard to social positions, emotions, and sex. For example, the hit show *Girls* on HBO follows aspiring writer Hannah who was recently cut off financially by her parents and left to fend for herself (with the help of her friends) in the harsh environment of Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Like *Skins*, *Girls* blatantly revels in the apathy and hipsterdom of its characters, primarily Hannah. Unlike *Skins*, however, Lena Dunham (creator and star of the show) wrestles with the subcultural trials of her generation. Critic Asawin Suebsaeng bemoans *Girls'* casual and crude exploration of female sexuality and millennial apathy. He describes the show as sexually "passionless" and rails against Hannah, calling her "an unsympathetic victim of First World Problems who mumbles her way through a Brooklynite's perdition of unpaid internships and missed orgasms" (Suebsaeng). Outside of a fledgling memoir and a dead-end internship, Hannah's life revolves around nothing. She has been slowly waiting for life to catch up to her, but her upper-middle class pedigree has lent her a lifeline and two years of freedom from responsibility. In an existential crisis after being cut-off and losing her internship, Hannah's friend Jessa suggests that Hannah tell her parents "she's an artist and if they don't support her she will get tuberculosis and die like Flaubert," Hannah takes this advice seriously, barging

into her parents hotel room and demanding they support her for another year, because she "is the voice of her generation, or a generation," and if they do not, she is "going to die, like Flaubert" ("Pilot," *Girls*). *Girls* playfully navigates millennial hipster irony. When Hannah casually compares herself to a tragic French novelist, she positions her life ambitions in almost an absurd light. But a difference exists between how *Skins* uses irony and how *Girls does*. Assuming *Girls* follows with the stereotypes that hipster subcultures feign authenticity without affecting change, then to a casual observer the passing comparisons to a tragic figure supports the assumption that:

> hipsterism fetishizes the authentic and regurgitates it with a
>
> winking inauthenticity. Those 18-to-34-year-olds called
>
> hipsters have defanged, skinned and consumed the fringe
>
> movements of the postwar era—Beat, hippie, punk, even
>
> grunge. Hungry for more, and sick with the anxiety of influence,
>
> they feed as well from the trough of the uncool. (Lorentzen)

Hannah and her friends become the embodiment of Lorentzen's criticism insomuch as she consumes previous generations and movements in order to form her subcultural identity. The cast of *Girls* is regurgitating the authentic traits, beliefs and fashion of generations past, even if it is as casually as humanly possible. However, their ability to represent previous movements enables them to simultaneously consume and critique archaic notions of cultural identities and affectively produce new-old identities, changing the manner through which cultural knowledge is obtained.

Irony and cynicism present a gateway for the separation from an authoritative, or dominant, perspective regarding cultural constructions. David Foster Wallace delved into the usage of televisual representation as a device for cynically challenging authority. Wallace claims that TV's "promulgation of cynicism about authority works to the general

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advantage of television… to the extent that TV can ridicule old-fashioned conventions... it can create an authority vacuum" (Wallace 62). The medium references authoritative culture and deconstructs it, revealing the constructed nature of the world. Lena Dunham utilizes *Girls* to simultaneously critique and embrace the quasi-authoritative aspect of hipster sub-culture. Dunham frames her show as "the rarefied white hipster thing," referring to the entitlement of her characters (Nussbaum). *Girls* finds absurdity in the absurd, mocking Hannah's culture and embracing it at the same time. These privileged private liberal art graduates and globetrotters who have "never had a job," are just as much victims of circumstance as they are of their own choices (*Girls*, "Adventurous"). The subsequent failures of the characters coupled with their seemingly privileged social standing demonstrate the constructed nature of cultural identities and affords them the ability to change the manner in which authenticity and authority are obtained through the recycling and manipulation of previous subcultural identities.

As Hannah's friendships and social position are tested she comes to resemble cynicism toward authority in that even hipster culture's divergence from mainstream authority becomes disrobed as a constructed function. The disrobing of the defiant culture grants the audience an uncanny superiority over the absurd irony of the character, because they are made aware of the authority within mainstream and hipster culture. Dunham simultaneously highlights the absurdity of hipster culture and makes the viewer "dependent on the cynical TV-watching," which helps to inform and shape the viewer into an ironic being, protecting them against "leaving oneself open to others' ridicule" (Wallace 63). *Girls* teaches the audience to interpret not only mainstream society, but also hipster culture cynically. In doing so, Dunham is able to demonstrate sincerity in her depiction of ironic irony through highlighting the insincerity of her character's cynical lifestyle. By recognizing Hannah's insincerity, Dunham critiques the sub-culture using the same mode

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the sub-culture uses to critique the social supremacy of mainstream culture. But most importantly, Hannah's ironic existence serves to separate her from mainstream authority as a means of self-preservation.

Forces within and outside Hannah's own specific social function determine her movement within her cultural space. The influence of their parentage and material socialization establish them within French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social tastes, wherein:

> Individuals do not move about in social space in a random way, partly because they are subject to the forces which structures this space...and partly because they resist the forces of the field with their specific inertia. That is, their properties, which may exist in embodied form, as dispositions, or in objectified form, in goods, qualifications etc. (Bourdieu 110)

Their social positioning existed before they had a choice to resist, embrace or corrupt the space into which they were socialized. Hannah hints to a simplistic variation of this theory when pleading for her parent's financial support. While comparing herself to Flaubert, Hannah's mother proclaims her to be "selfish," to which Hannah responds, "whose fault is that, mom" ("Pilot," *Girls*)? Hannah is well aware of her socialization (who made her), but her apparent conformity lies more in self-preservation than social capital gain. David McRaney warns that the "desire to conform is strong and unconscious," but that "the desire to keep everyone happy and to adhere to social conventions is a good thing. It keeps you close and connected to the norms that make it easier to work together in the modern world" (McRaney 189). Hannah's concern is not in whether or not she can keep up appearances as part of a social capital competition model, but rather if she can continue life as a member of the subcultural hipster class to which she belongs. While her

desire wavers (her apathy toward beginning a career), her conviction to her social position remains true.

The irony of *Girls* lies in the sincerity of the characters' insincerity. Contrasting with Tony who in Skins willfully builds a persona that others can consume without breaching his true emotions, Hannah struggles with the walls she has built up, which guard her emotions. Hannah's casual rape jokes targeted at her prospective boss during an interview, her casual take on her friend Jessa's abortion and Hannah's "wanting AIDS," so she can have a real problem as opposed to small indignities[2], demonstrate that Hannah uses ironic insincerity "as a shield against criticism," building upon the idea that "irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise. To live ironically is to hide in public" (Wampole). Hannah's jokes about otherwise serious matters reveal a fear of exposing herself as vulnerable to the real world problems she and her friends are facing. These statements are ironic, because she jokes about the severity of these situations in order to *appear* as if she does not care, but in truth she is genuinely concerned about Jessa, her job status and STDs. Hannah masks sincere sentiments so that she does not have to deal with the possibility that she will, again, lose her social position as the carefree jokester that she formed into over the past six years. While irony can set up appearances and deflect criticism for Tony and Hannah, its presence transcends mere appearances and allows for the casual use of sexist rhetoric.

1.1 Is Sexism over?

Irony provides a means for the possible dilution of hipsterdom's subversive tendencies, leading to its recuperation into traditional modes of gender and sex hierarchies, which manifests as objectification using ironic sexist and/or misogynistic

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[2] Each one of these defense mechanisms occurs in the episode "Vagina Panic."

rhetoric. Returning to Tony, he refers to his girlfriend Michelle, with mock affection, as

"Nips." In one of his conversations with her he greets her with, "Hey, Nips…It's a funny

name. I've seen nipples, nips, but, gosh golly, yours are hilarious" (*Skins*). This particular

pet name infuriates Michelle (who is sitting in a bubble bath during this scene[3]), and

despite her finding the name derogatory, Tony refuses to stop, going so far as to call her

"Nips" after their breakup in episode seven ("Michelle"). Referring to Michelle as "Nips"

keeps Tony from making an emotional connection with Michelle outside of their strong

sexuality. In an ostensibly more tolerant and aware society, the idea has emerged that:

> women have made plenty of progress because of feminism– indeed full
>
> equality has allegedly been achieved–so now it's okay, even amusing,
>
> to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women, because, certainly
>
> these images can't possibly undermine women's equality at this late
>
> date. (Douglas)

Douglas attributes the perception that sexism has ended to "media savvy" hipsters who

have consumed cultural icons and hint at sexist tropes in a coy, wink-wink fashion. Many

criticisms were levied against *Skins* in the U.S., but few have touched on the effects it

has on young girls psychologically. Josephine Styles stated, however, that "one of the

things that most infuriates me is how 'Skins' depicts young girls, and even women, as

sexual objects. What does this teach our young women of the future about themselves?

That to win a guy, a girl must succumb to him sexually" (Styles). Styles refers primarily to

the physical act of sex, but an equal if not greater stakes lies in the sexist rhetoric.

Constantly breaking Michelle down and belittling her body (the nipples issue come up

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[3] In the next chapter I explore Laura Mulvey's cinema theories about the male gaze and
the differences of sexualities within *Skins*, *Girls* and others.

throughout the series) makes it easier for her to devalue her fellow student, Cadie, as a sexual object for Tony's mission to lose Stanley's virginity.

Tony's desire to "get Stanley laid" not only highlights his selfish tendencies, but also further demonstrates his sexist view of women. Tony's plan for losing Stanley's virginity is to "get some girl ridiculously spliffed. In her confused state she comes to believe how–momentarily of course–you're [Stanley] attractive and then… she bangs your brains out" ("Tony," *Skins*). Tony enlists Michelle to find a willing "mate" for Stanley. Channeling a different form of irony, Michelle, who is objectified by Tony, reflects his desires and in turn finds a willing participant and "because Michelle is another girl…promotes sexism by all genders. By treating Cadie in a stereotypically male way–a sex object–the message is sent to girls to objectify other girls for male gratification" (Fontaine). Tragically the ironic sexism and misogyny has an identifiable effect on the other characters and breeds a group dynamic where actual sexism and sexual objectification occurs. But *Skins* is not the only show where ironic sexism occurs.

Girls' own Hannah has an ironic sexist "sex-buddy" constantly degrading females. Adam is Hannah's part-time and later full-time lover. As the first season progresses, the two begin a more conventional romantic relationship. In their defining episode, "Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too," while ringing his sister, Adam says, "Yo skank, where you at? Getting that pussy pounded" (*Girls*). Obviously, Adam has intimacy issues and possesses a skewed view of women. This indicates that Adam actually believes his sister to be a skank. Based on the randomness of the greeting and lightness of his tone, Adam is using the greeting ironically. Alissa Quart columnist for *NYmag*.com defines hipster sexism as:

> a distancing gesture, a belief that simply by applying quotations,
>
> uncool, questionable, and even offensive material about

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women can be alchemically transformed. We think we're over

sexism yet our ironic expressions of it can only reinforce the basic

problem, which is that women are paid less and (degradingly)

sexualized against their will far more than men. (Quart)

As a guy calling a woman a skank, Adam is behaving as if sexism is over. In actuality,

his irony perpetuates the degradation of women through demoralizing language. The

proliferation and acceptance of ironic hipster sexism "makes 'pussy pounding' funny

because it announces that the phrase is now ironic — as is, 'skank'—rather than gross or

offensive" (Quart). The difference, though, between the more direct sexism of *Skins* and

Adam's ironic quips is that throughout the first season, Adam is characterized as

ridiculous and absurd. Lena Dunham sets up Adam, through many of these "ironically"

sexist moments involving Hannah, as a destructive character insomuch as he constantly

belittles Hannah, leading to a drop in her self-esteem. While his greeting his sister in this

manner is "funny," the audience is not meant to be laughing with Adam, rather at the

absurdity of his irony. In this same episode Adam urinates on Hannah, who is in the

shower, as a joke. While the audience may view Adam's behavior as absurd, the

audience also sees the damage his sexist joking has on Hannah, which causes her

lowered self-esteem, leading to her breaking up with him in the first season's final

episode. His function serves to highlight the absurdity of how hipster culture has come to

view sexism and women and admonish the psychological affects this type of ironic

behavior has upon females (Hannah).

1.2 Conclusion

Irony pervades hipster culture. While most people would interpret irony as having

a more direct correlation, such as a hipster wearing a mesh-back cap (commonly known

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as a "trucker hat") that says "Long Haul" when he or she has no connection to trucking.
Hipsters use the term more abstractly, as they are often interpreted as having no
connection to or interest in the era in which their clothes are from or in not being racist or
sexist, but using sexist or racist language as a crude form of mockery. Hipsters are often
characterized as inauthentic, irony machines that shallowly consume cultural material. On
the one hand, *Skins* demonstrates how irony can dilute character depth, filling the voids
with insubstantial corporeal and material artifacts. *Girls*, on the other hand, uses irony in
an ironic fashion, a kind of self-aware nod to hipsters, implying that the writers and
producers know they are being ironic and that they ironically poke fun at themselves
because they are that which they portray as absurd. Even though it appears that *Girls*
and *Skins* approach the problem differently, they each risk greater cynicism, because the
hipster "is an easy target for mockery. However, scoffing at the hipster is only a diluted
form of his own affliction. He is merely a symptom and the most extreme manifestation of
ironic living" (Wampole). Counteracting hipsters' own self-mockery with mockery
recirculates the hyper-individualized loop in which the millennial hipster generation lives.
The unique aspect of the hipster movement is that underneath the layers of
inauthenticity, insincerity and irony, these young men and women derive their beliefs from
some source. Much of so-called mainstream criticism came from writers such as
Christian Lorentzen who blames hispterdom for the dilution of the present cultural
moment. But Douglass Haddow views hipsters as a symptom, rather than a source,
proclaiming:

> We are a defeated generation, resigned to the hypocrisy of those
> before [them], who once sang songs of rebellion and now sell them back
> to [them]. [They] are the last generation, a culmination of all previous
> things, destroyed by the vapidity that surrounds [them]. The hipster

represents the end of Western civilization – a culture so detached and

disconnected that it has stopped giving birth to anything new. (Haddow)

A complex recursive relationship forced hipsters to cling to inauthenticity and ironically

scoff at themselves. They are desperately searching for a place in a thinly spread

technological world, which has diluted previously valuable cultural artifacts, turning them

into nothing more than hollow manifestations of previous movements.

Chapter 2

Say That You Love Me

Acceptance is an important part of social living. It could come in the form of personal acquiescence with one's own reality, or it can come from being accepted into a social circle or culture. For hipsters, the concept of becoming part of a culture determines their tastes and social position. Constantly trying to be or belong, individualization thrusts them into a crossroads where they struggle to find authenticity and acceptance within or outside of social conditioning. Be it changing fashion, behaviors, or sexual exhibitionism, hipsters are under social pressure from class conditioning. An intermixing of youth turmoil and social problems are often magnified by their attempts to fit in. Being a part of something becomes the mode of acceptance, but their identities are recycled back into a system of classifications that dictates behavior. Unbeknownst to the members of the subculture, they come to be defined by their conditioning, bearing the burden of socialization and the inheritance of cultural capital from their first order social position, which limits the possibly subversive prowess of hipster subculture.

2.1 My Life in the Bourgeoisie

It's Kind of a Funny Story, a film released in 2010, became a quick hit amongst hipster circles. The film tells the story of Craig Gilner, a stressed out sixteen year old, who checks himself into the hospital after contemplating suicide. He spends the next week in the adult psychiatric unit, coming to terms with reality and his place within it. By his own admission, Craig has a favorable family life. While in the hospital Craig tells the audience, "don't blame my parents for how messed up I am… it's not like I was never hugged as a child or anything. In fact, they've been pretty supportive through all this. They're always on the lookout for new ways to fix me" Craig's problems are often

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overshadowed by his family life and social position (*It's Kind of a Funny Story)*. His primary complaint about his parents is that they care too much. In truth, the juxtaposition between Craig's overbearing upper-middle-class parents and his stress and depression over his quality education, exposes, as Eric Hynes claims, "his privileged race, class, and access to superlative specialized public education…" and posits him "as a universalized figure, stressed out in a banal "[w]e all hate homework" tenor, with suicidal tendencies hazy to the point of insincere" (Hynes*).* Craig's predicament is unfortunate, but because of who he his, who his family is, he has never had to face so-called real world problems. His inability to shed his connection to what Kenneth Burke[4] calls his first culture, which could otherwise be referred to as the culture passed down by his family, will eventually lead to a break between his understanding of his being within his culture and his efforts to transcend and escape his privileged social standing.

Social conditioning weighs heavily on the hipster identity. Craig belongs to a social class that affords him access to cultural and academic capital, which facilitates his own social mobility. In *Distinction,* Pierre Bourdieu claims that the resource of academic capital is:

> the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural
>
> transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (the
>
> efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital directly
>
> inherited from the family). Through its value-inculcating and value-
>
> imposing operations, the school also helps (to a greater or lesser extent,
>
> depending on the initial disposition, i.e., class of origin) to form a general,
>
> transposable disposition towards legitimate culture. (23)

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[4] See Introduction where I introduce Burke's concept of consubstantiality

Craig reaches his existential crisis because of the conditioning by his social class. He attends a school, Executive Pre-Professional High School, which nurtures students and prepares them for professional, business and political careers. His family, peers and instructors have been grooming him toward a continuation of his father's professional work ethic, but Craig fears the cultural capital that embodies his subjectivity. He laments, "okay, so my dad works too much" and that he is either constantly tending to the needs of clients, or worried about Craig's application to the Gates' summer school program. Craig is not as cool, hip or well adjusted as his friends (in terms of accepting his role in the transmission of cultural capital, which will grant him access to the same privilege and social standing as his family and friends). His lack of acceptance of, or reluctance to conform to, his socialized cultural status, leads to an attempt by Craig to find something clinically wrong with him. While Craig belongs within a privileged social sphere, it is his existential struggle against socialization, which his friends easily accept, that establishes him as a trying to embody his first order identity while at the same time subverting it through alternative perspectives.

Craig straddles the fence between self-discovery and insincere identifications. The social pressure surrounding Craig inhibits his ability to use what Amy C. Wilkins would refer to as "cultural symbols to establish group memberships to make [his life] more tolerable" (3). Unlike his friends, Craig is never shown enjoying music, literature or art. Whenever Craig is shown in flashbacks with his friends, he is usually sitting quietly, distantly by himself while his friends, Aaron and Nia, are looking through vintage records, reading, or smoking weed. Craig's perceived distance from his friends stems from his perception of them as fake. Whereas Craig must face real-world problems, such as depression and suicide, he feels his group of friends only posture for affection and attention. Craig references the way in which Aaron and Nia originally hide

their relationship from him, leading him to believe that Aaron "stole" Nia from him. Craig claims that when he is with any of his peers, they "sometimes look at [him] like [he's] from another planet." Craig's attire certainly does not rival the hipster-chic of his best friend Aaron (see figure 2.1). Whether his friends see Craig as an outsider or not, Craig sees himself as an outsider.

He doesn't see himself as belonging to his parent's social class, and his friend's upper-class hipster style eludes his comprehension. His "breakdown" is a dramatic manifestation of "the adolescent imperative…to uncover or resolve who we really are: that is, to find stable knowable identities" (Wilkins 4). Craig is trying to find acceptance within differing spectrums of hispterdom, either authentic or ironic. Craig feels divided by the multitude of identities available to him. Kenneth Burke explains that:

> Identification is compensatory to division…if men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be a man's very essence. It would not be an ideal, as it is not, partly embodied in material conditions and partly frustrated by these same conditions. (Burke 182)

Craig loses grip of his existence within society, because he cannot immediately rectify the division between his socialization and personal proclivities. The multiplicity of possible identities breeds a subculture dependent on either the acceptance or the divergence from the "material conditions" Burke references. While Aaron attempts to navigate the social space through becoming a material embodiment (fashion trends, music tastes, etc.…) of his cultural knowledge, Craig's identity appears to be based on personal tastes. The juxtaposition of Aaron's hipster style and Craig's belief in his ostensibly outsider individuality represents two spectrums of hipsterdom that equally stem from the adolescent search for identity.

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Figure 2.1: Notice the flashy, brightly colored style of Aaron, compared against the

plain, dull colored garb of Craig.

Aaron's possibly ironic consumption of classic rock and post-grunge fashion

lends credence to the "myth" of the disingenuous hipster. Craig, on the other hand, is

intended to represent hipster mobilization in a positive light, coming to terms with one's

individuality and how it separates one from popular culture. He finds himself. But

contrary to his friends' seeming acceptance of their social standing and mere aesthetic

appeals, Craig casts aside his possible bourgeoisie future, realizing his artistic talents

and becomes a representative for hipster individualism. Craig's plight is poignant in the

sense that his self-discovery and social turmoil illuminate the hidden social pressure

that teens face in the age of overachievement and social-media individualism.

However, his ability to abandon scholarly pursuits and become an artist can only occur

as easily as it does, because his original social position.

By the end of his modern-day hero's journey cycle, Craig becomes the envy of

everyone. During his time in hospital, Craig befriends a troubled adult, Bobby, who faces difficulties adjusting to reality. Bobby refers to Craig as "Cool Craig," and begins to look up to Craig, because of his stability. Part of what facilitates Craig's realization that his problems are miniscule, in comparison to his fellow patient's serious mental illnesses, is when Bobby tells Craig, "What I would do to be you for a day." To Bobby, Craig's love interest Noelle, and the rest of the patients, Craig has it made. Craig's ability to use his access to cultural capital to enhance his own creative movement follows the inevitability that cultural theorist Dick Hebdige describes, namely that the "young people who choose to inhabit a spectacular youth culture are simultaneously *returned,* as they are represented on TV and in the newspapers, to the place where common sense would have them fit" (Hebdige 94). Craig breaks through his socialization but the forces at play within society work to draw him back into the social sphere from which he was birthed.

No expense spared, Craig's upper-middle class lifestyle allows for him to "randomly" check himself into the hospital and find himself, a "luxury" his ward friends do not have. Unlike Bobby, he has the ability to painlessly–and rewardingly–put his life on hold and pursue his newfound interests worry free. In *It's Kind of a Funny Story's* penultimate scene, Craig's release day, he relates to Dr. Minerva (the ward's attending psychiatrist) that he "always thought art was just bourgeoisie decadence." With this revelation, Craig correlates his newfound artistic ability as counter to his socialization. Art represents the struggle and chaos within Craig's mind, not decadence and insincerity. Craig's epiphany of self-acceptance recycles back to his birthright. Craig's entire journey ironically represents bourgeoisie decadence, because his social standing allows him to take risks and explore new pursuits and seek individuality and acceptance without the anxiety of failure, because he wagers nothing. The goal of the

social order has been met and because of the limited risk associated with Craig's social endeavors, he helps ensure his incorporation into the dominant order. Dick Hebdige writes about the role of subcultures in being used as a means for reclaiming possible social deviations by incorporating the nonconformity as actually being a function of mainstream ideology. Hebdige claims, "it is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates" (94). Craig's slight deviation from his social plan means little in the scope of how he comes to benefit from his social position. Craig loses control of his cultural and academic capital, but manipulates his approach to cultural life and inadvertently accepts his social class, which affords him the ability to determine taste. He becomes a volunteer and mentor in the psych ward, using his experience as a model for those below his social standing to emulate. For Craig, identification stems from his ability to reject or embrace his birthed social position.

2.2 Accepting Sexuality

Keeping with the theme of acceptance, hipsters find themselves mitigated by cultural forces that recycle them back toward mainstream, or dominant, cultural positions. Within certain depictions, hipster subcultures are subject to dominant and traditional patriarchal manifestations wherein women are forced to demonstrate their value in terms of their sexuality subordination to men. Craig's story focuses on an individual's search for acceptance from and within differing spectrums of hipsterdom. Acceptance within subcultural circles takes on varying degrees of destructive and liberating behaviors, many of which circle around sexual desires and objectifications. While sexism and misogyny are not exclusive traits within hipster culture, the presence of these representations signifies hipsterdom's inability to separate from dominant

conceptions of gender and sex. As is evident from the first chapter, the double entendre *Skins* not only refers to the slang term the group uses for rolling paper, but also references their sexual promiscuity. For some of the characters, their identity, placement and mobility within the group can only be defined by their sexual exhibitionism. Michelle, Tony's girlfriend, quickly becomes inscribed as a sexual being. Her upward mobility in her hipster circle can only occur through the manner in which she is able to shift and exhibit her identity as a sexual body.

As addressed in the first chapter, Michelle's constant belittlement by Tony causes not only the audience to view her in terms of her sexuality, but she begins to view herself in this way as well. Ironic or intentional, the sexism to which Michelle is subjected leads her to search for constant physical and visual approval. Her appearance matters to Tony; therefore, she interprets her own self worth as being defined by her physical and sexual appearance. After months, if not years, of emotional denigration by Tony, Michelle becomes conscious of and depressed by Tony's growing disinterest. After their friend Chris's party, Michelle and Tony spend the night at his house. While undressing and stripping down to her underwear, Tony sits in front of a fish tank, enjoying the quirks of the fish and ignoring Michelle (see figure 2.2). Once Michelle lies down, Tony stands up, looks at her and says, "You know what I love about your body? One boob's bigger than the other" (*Skins*, "Chris"). Tony's comment leaves Michelle dejected and causes her anxiety about her body. As awkwardness surrounds the two, Stanley walks into the room and comes in looking for a shirt to borrow. Tony obliges Stanley and departs to retrieve a shirt leaving Michelle and Stanley alone. Incensed by the previous event, Michelle sits up, turns to Stanley removes the covers baring her breasts and asks, "What do you think of my tits? Is one bigger than the other?" (*Skins*, "Chris"). Stanley says, "they're great." Michelle seeks approval from

Stanley, who has been trying to hide his love for Michelle since they were kids, through the only means she knows: her physical appearance. The most telling aspect of this scene, however, is the framing of the shots.

Figure 2.2: Michelle displaying her body for not only Tony, but also the audience.

The display of Michelle's body in this scene demonstrates and encourages the fetishizing of the female image as bearer of the male gaze. In 1975, Laura Mulvey published her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in which she described women "in a patriarchal culture as the signifier for the male Other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsession… by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" (Mulvey 2084-2085). In relation to narrative cinema, women become the bearer of meaning through the voyeuristic spectacle of film. While standing nearly naked and vulnerable in front of Tony, Michelle becomes the object of the audience's voyeuristic consumption of the female image. *Skins* fulfills the scopophilic function of "taking other people as object, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze," as Michelle is simultaneously

stripped to be judged by Tony and the audience (Mulvey 2086). But the primary

substantiation of Mulvey's theories occurs in the audience identification with Tony and

Stanley. Both characters gaze upon Michelle while the audience feeds off of their

objectifying gaze. When Michelle exposes herself to Stanley, the cinematic male gaze

is strengthened, allowing the cinema viewer to obtain a privileged voyeuristic glimpse

and see Michelle being seen (see figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Episode 3, "Chris": Michelle being seen being seen, a double effect of the

male gaze implants her as an objectified, sexualized body.

Tony's constant objectification of Michelle has led to her valuing herself as a sexualized

object and this spills over into the audience who shares Stanley's shock, because they

have both been permitted candid glimpses of her. Both shots facilitate the second

aspect of Mulvey's pleasure of viewing, which "demands the identification of the ego

with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of

his like… a function… of ego libido" (Mulvey 2088). Two sites for identification exist

within the objectification of Michelle.

Tony and Stanley's opposite reactions paint a broader stroke in that what one gaze lacks, the opposing one can fill. Written in flesh, Michelle bears meaning for Tony and Stanley, objectified through lust and wanting (Stanley) or as a means to a sexual end (Tony). The framing of Michelle, allowing her to be seen being seen supports Mulvey's theory that:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 2088)

In sticking to the theme of acceptance, Michelle comes to believe that the only way she can be accepted by men is if she puts herself on display and facilitates the active/male and passive/female roles. Michelle can only *become* part of the group if she accepts her role within a traditional hegemonic perspective.   Her role in the group becomes understood in terms of sexuality through Tony's sexual fantasies.

Like Craig in *It's Kind of a Funny Story,* Michelle's pressure to belong stems from her connection to her social background. Michelle has spent years seeing her mother Jillian use sexuality to gain the favor of upper-class men. In her brief appearances, Jillian is shown with or referencing at least four different boyfriends who all appear wealthy, based on their manner of dress and the vehicles they drive. Unsettled by her mother's promiscuity, the effects of Jillian's actions play a vital role in Michelle's socialization and how she approaches being accepted by men. In order for

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Michelle to gain acceptance, she must embrace the sexuality of her mother and become the object of male desire. The cultural capital inherited by Michelle positions her as an object for the sexual desires of men. Because Michelle embodies the sexual-social position passed down by her mother, she cannot fully individualize away from her cultural birthright, which encapsulates her in a system where men produce social tastes and women are posed to reflect their desires.

Keeping with adolescent stereotypes, the characters of *Skins* are all sex crazed. If they are not trying to get Stanley laid, then they are attempting to fit in using their sexuality as the primary means of acceptance. Tony clearly leads the group, manipulating and pressuring the others to live in such as way that is advantageous to his will. To this end, his emotionless and casual approach toward sexuality affects the rest of the group. Even Tea, the openly gay member of the group, reflects the hyper-heterosexuality of Tony. She proposes to Tony, after learning of his plan to deflower Stanley, that "if you can get that kid's cherry popped, I'll accidentally lose control of my breasts at the next halftime show" (*Skins*, "Tony"). Tea is characterized as a proud lesbian. By proposing to expose her breasts to Tony and Abbud, she is indulging their heterosexual fantasies.

The bet becomes a minor theme throughout the series, but all of the males are eager to collect on the bet, even going so far as to lie to her and claim that Stanley is indeed no longer a virgin. Feeling the pressure and seeking acceptance, Tea shows the group her breasts, much to the delight of her male friends. Tony extends the sexual social pressures to another level. When on a date arranged by their fathers, Tony and Tea have sex, an act she immediately regrets, although she is again pressured into having sex with Tony later in the series, because the social consequences of rejecting Tony and his sexual fantasies could spell the end of her friendships. Tony exhibits his

heterosexuality as a means to establish a set of criteria by which he can permit

acceptance into his realm of friendship.

Adrienne Rich characterized this type of behavior as providing evidence of

compulsory heterosexuality, a manner in which males dominate the opposite sex. One

of the primary means of maintaining male control over women is "to force [male

sexuality] upon them" (Rich 1594). Tony imposed his sexuality directly onto Tea, but

every member of the group becomes caught in a sphere wherein they can only prove

themselves as socially valuable if they share in similar *heterosexual* behaviors as Tony.

The hipster culture of *Skins* does not fall far from the hegemonic characteristic of

dominant culture. Tony's need for everyone to prove themselves sexually stems from

traditional heteromasculine anxiety, which is

> not that [men] will have women's sexual appetites forced on
>
> them…but that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that
>
> men could be allowed sexual and emotional–therefore economic–
>
> access to women *only* on women's terms, otherwise being left on the
>
> periphery of the matrix. (Rich 1598-1599)

Tony's method of controlling his friendships, male or female, is imposing his sexuality

upon them. The anxiety to which Rich speaks manifests for Tony through his ability to

constrain the sexuality of his girlfriend Michelle and his love interest Tea. His sexualized

rhetoric belittles their bodies and sexuality causing them to rely on his sexual approval

in order to maintain a semblance of self-worth. Similarly to Craig's connection to

mainstream society, the teens of *Skins* are embodied by the heterosexist identities of

the culture that birthed them. In turn, the characters of Michelle and Tea become

expressions of collapsed identities, embodied manifestations of a dominant cultural

order that determines their sexual value.

2.3 Liberating Sexuality or Dominant Reconstructions?

Moving from the overtly objectifying properties of *Skins*, *Girls* attempts to problematize masculine sexuality and play upon the fear of feminized sexuality. Like the characters of *Skins,* the characters in *Girls* flex and enjoy their sexual identities. Hannah in particular uses sex to ease the pain of being financially cut off from her parents. As stated in chapter one, Adam does not treat Hannah well, but for some reason she continues to return to him for sex. Completely opposing the glamorized teen sex of *Skins*, *Girls* presents sex as something perhaps more realistic. Sometimes it is passionate, other times, as *Girls* often demonstrates, sex is an awkward experience, lacking in passion but completely natural. Glossing over pleasantries, Adam and Hannah cut to the chase. Adam tells Hannah, "lie on your stomach… and grab your legs" (*Girls*, "Pilot"). While Adam fetches lube, Hannah disrobes below the waist and lies on the couch awaiting Adam's return (see figure 2.4). During sex, Hannah does not grasp Adam's attempts at dirty talk and seems confused by what is going on. The sex scene culminates with Adam attempting to penetrate her anus to which Hannah exclaims, "please don't do that. That feels awful, thanks" (*Girls*, "Pilot"). The casual nature of Adam and Hannah's sexual encounter, with Hannah brushing aside Adam's penetrational oversight, demonstrates the unglamorous and uneasy nature of hipster sexuality. By framing sex in such a casual manner, *Girls* attempts to contrast the stereotypical glamorous portrayal of twenty-something sexuality that is prevalent TV and film.

Figure 2.4: Hannah and Adam preparing to have sex.

Dunham creates a show that contrasts pop-television sexuality with a realistic hipster perspective. Emily Nussbaum states that whereas "there is no shortage of nudity on cable television, of course, where strip-downs are your prize for watching an 'adult' series—porn with purchase, like a trip to the Champagne Room…the sex on *Girls* isn't a reward, it's a revelation" (Nussbaum). The sex may be strange, awkward and even unpleasant to watch, but it provides a lens for critiquing stereotypes of the subculture and expected sexual behaviors. The characters exemplify a subculture that has been taught to laugh, love, and fornicate in a certain way, but because they are embodied by a digital age that bombards them with hundreds, if not thousands, of cultural symbols per day, they create identities that represent consubstantial identifications with a multitude of perspectives. These identities are built upon the multiplicity caused by the different symbols, signs and messages that make up their tastes. Hannah's sexual identity demonstrates the complexity of continually identifying

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with the first order while admonishing its manifestations.

Being a female hipster in what is supposed to be a post-sexist world is just as complex as it is liberating. Adam and Tony share similarities, but most importantly, they represent and perpetuate the trope of insincere ironic sexism. Of all the strange non-sex-related misogynist actions perpetrated by Adam, one of his most peculiar behaviors is revealed in a sex scene between he and Hannah. About halfway through, Adam creates a backstory to their sex as he imagines Hannah as an eleven-year-old junkie whom he has taken off of the streets and is punishes sexually by "sending her back to her parents covered in cum" (*Girls*, "Vagina Panic"). Hannah's face shows the uneasiness of this sexual encounter. After Adam ejaculates on her arm and finishes telling her how filthy she is, Hannah looks disgusted and disturbed, choosing not to look Adam in the eyes. Hannah's lack of enthusiasm and overall lack of movement positions the encounter as diametrically one-sided with Adam occupying an active sexual position and Hannah becoming a passive bearer of Adam's sexual desires.

The fact that Hannah continues the relationship despite the continual denigrations to which Adam subjects her contributes to the demonstrative reduction of women's identities down to male embodiments of sexualization. Jennifer K. Wesely claims that in these types of sexual relationships women and reduced "to certain embodied meanings, particularly in terms of sexualization…the images and behaviors conveyed and then internalized by girls have become increasingly pornographic" (Wesely 56). She is written as a bodily means to an end, which is Adam's pleasure. She lives in a world that bombards her with bodily and ideological symbols and ideals that reproduce an obedient subject. When considering Wesley's claim that "gender socialization maintains and reinforces dominant constructions of power and inequality, these too become internalized by the individual," Hannah's acceptance of Adam's

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degrading behavior adheres to traditional conceptions of active/male passive/ female and the ways in which these roles dictate who gains control (Wesely 19). Because Hannah feels self-conscious about her weight and appearance, Adam's acceptance of her causes her to latch onto that sense of belonging and form an identity based in her sexualization. Hannah is aware of the problem of identifying with Adam's sexuality, as evidenced by her visual disdain for the actions, but she feels compelled to placate the pressure required for her to maintain sexual liberation. However, she partakes, because as Adrienne Rich claims, a shift in heterosexual rhetoric has occurred. Whereas "institutionalized heterosexuality told women for centuries that [they] were dangerous…the embodiment of carnal lust…today it prescribes the 'sensuous,' 'sexually liberated' women in the West" (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 42). The rhetoric forming Hannah's sexual identity is one of contained sexual liberation. She has control of her sexuality (choice of partner, actions, and openness), but she is only permitted to form such an identity so long as it follows a typical heterosexual framework (active/male, passive/female). Hannah and Adam's relationship, however, provides only a glimpse into the greater issues of identity and acceptance that all of the characters of *Girls* face.

Shoshanna, the desperate virgin, is surrounded by sexually "experienced" peers and laments her sexual shortcomings, attempting–like Hannah–to seek acceptance through sex. Her first attempt and break the proverbial seal ends abruptly when her partner explains that he "refuses to have sex with a virgin. It's not [his] thing" (*Girls*, "Hannah's Diary"). The rejection upsets her, but the most important failing to her is that she must face her friends as a virgin. For Shoshanna, it is about grasping hold of that sense of belonging and acceptance within her sexually liberated group of friends that drives her need to lose her virginity. She wants to be like one of the girls. Marnie,

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Hannah's best friend, feels trapped in a passionless relationship. After years of being known as belonging to a couple with her longtime boyfriend Charlie, she no longer accepts this role and seeks refuge in the art world, longing to have the social and sexual freedom of her friends (Hannah and Jessa).

The fourth member of the group, Jessa, is a sexually liberated, modern bohemian jet setter. Unlike the other three, Jessa takes control of her identity and sexuality, accosting a young man in a bar and having sex with him in a bathroom. She lets no one make decisions for her. But even she faces issues of acceptance. After years of world-travel and little responsibility, Jessa must take on a job as a babysitter to survive. At first she sees herself as an outsider while mingling with the other sitters at the park, but quickly relates to them, saying, "I'm just like all of you" (*Girls,* "Hannah's Diary"). Jessa acts tough and independent, but when she faces a new and uncomfortable trial she, just like her friends, extends herself so that those around her accept her, making it easier for her to accept her new domesticated role.

Like Hannah, Jessa's identity becomes contained within embodied meanings. Sexually explorative and social free, Jessa's Burkean[5] division of identity and struggle against 'embodied meanings' manifests less from sexuality and more through domesticity. Adrienne Rich characterizes motherhood as taking on an institutionalized function. Rich states, "institutionalized motherhood demands of women's maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (Rich 42). Jessa formed a unique individual identity while abroad. Yet the prospect of a pregnancy and the forced dualism of either abortion or maternity causes Jessa to seek maternal connectivity (her job as a babysitter). Jessa's moment of togetherness with the children and the other babysitters

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[5] See Introduction.

demonstrates that her new identity can form only if she embraces the ever-looming prospect of motherhood, which has been thrust upon her. As with Hannah, she has fluidity of identification, but only within a contained space adhering to compulsory institutions. In order to gain acceptance within their social spaces, their identities eventually fall in line with their embodied meanings. All of the "girls" face existential moments, whether sexual, social or otherwise, where they struggle to define themselves and actively seek new modes through which they can assemble a sense of belonging. The social pressure within themselves and from mainstream society forces them, as it does all of the before-mentioned hipster characters, to conform in order to survive or exist within an ordered society.

2.4 Conclusion

The desire to conform weighs heavily in the subconscious decisions that young people make when exploring subcultural identifications. Hipsters represent the point of separation between those seeking societal acceptance, those seeking personal acquiescence, and the overlap between the two. Even the hyper-individual, which will be further examined in the third chapter and conclusion, needs acceptance, belonging, and conformity to some degree. Being a part of a group is a necessity when attempting to navigate new or uncomfortable spaces. David McRaney relates the nature of conformity as such:

> You may not agree with the zeitgeist, but you know conformity is p
> art of the game of life…. When you visit someone else's home, you
> do as that person does…You shave your legs or your face. You wear
> deodorant. You conform…you conform because social acceptance is built
> into your brain. To thrive, you know you need allies… You get a better

picture of the world when you can receive information from multiple

sources. (186-187)

Hipsters compile information from a vast number of resources, much greater than

previous generations had access to. Because of the gravity of their socialization,

Hipster consumption ventures into the realm of disingenuousness and it's hard to

discern where their subcultural traits begin and their dominant traits end. Their

consumption of cultural aesthetics or sexual exhibitionism only comes from their

exposure to a complex digitally written world. Whether it is mental illness, sexuality or

group connection, these hipsters all share in the desire to belong to something, to

grasp hold of an identity or subculture to which they can conform and within which they

may be accepted.

Chapter 3

Consuming Culture

Hipster's use of irony attempts to subvert and their subcultural ideology separates them from mainstream culture, but their style cannot escape the marketing forces that drive capital. What they start–whether it be fashion, music or even food–is quickly picked up by commercial capital, digested and regurgitated into neat consumer packaging intended for hipsters' own consumption. They are culturally forced to produce and consume, becoming caricatures of their ironic, and in some cases, authentic attempts at individuality. The capitalization of hipsterdom birthed a greater expanse of coffee shops and bookstores and facilitated a boom in the thrift shop and bike market. The saturation of a commercial lifestyle created by entities and individuals who seek to mass-produce and capitalize on hipster aesthetics conflates the subversive abilities of outsider culture and manipulates hipster lifestyle as a source of market capital.

Matt Granfield, an Australian writer and journalist, feeling despondent with the direction of his life, at thirty years old decided to change his lifestyle and live as a hipster. Granfield's book *HipsterMattic* focuses on the satirical irony of his venture into ironic living: creating dry coffee shop poetry or looking homeless. The vast majority of the book, no matter his pursuits, deals with economic impact of hipsterdom, i.e. the market of being and consuming hipster. His first major *hipventure* is creating a hipster market stall where he will sell cupcakes and "make some jewelry out of board-game pieces…" because "all the cool kids are doing that" (Granfield 44). The dualism of this exploration shows the frivolity of hipster economics and further bemoans the hipster market share that capital culture has gained. In order for Matt to get people interested and make his stall work he must first dress appropriately. Part fiction, part autobiography, Granfield chronicles his

search for the ultimate hipster attire. He starts with footwear. After asking around and finding the hippest shoe store, he eventually settles on one. In a telling expose of the inauthenticity of the market, Granfield relates his impression of the store:

> It was a Saturday afternoon but the shop was empty. I didn't know
> if that was a good or bad sign. I guessed it was good from the
> perspective that no one else seemed to have heard of it, so it
> definitely wasn't mainstream, but bad in the sense that if these
> shoes were so cutting-edge hipster, only the most cutting-edge
> hipsters would realize how cool they were. I decided the best thing
> to do would be to ask for help. These were the experts after all.
> (Granfield 54)

Consciously unaware of his participatory function in the capitalization of hipster fashion, Granfield problematizes the coolness competition factor in keeping up hipster appearances. The need to obtain the hippest of the hip product or status signifies that "taste is not stable and peaceful, but a means of strategy and competition" (Greif 2). Within the desire to individuate from mainstream society and create a unique identity, hipster subculture becomes a "crossroads where young people from different origins, all crammed together, jockey for social gain" (Greif 2). The methods of hipster consumption are being driven, as Mark Greif shows, by factors beyond their control. Hipsters are subjected to mainstream market forces that idolize the need to *be* individual. When shaping their subcultural identities, hipsters judge their social value based on the how they are able to grab hold of any cultural material before anyone else can. Granfield understands the importance of achieving the status of the most individuated individual and imitates the competition for cool. Granfield demonstrates the complex set of rules

that order hipster fashion creating a specialized, and possibly high price, market, which must be followed, or else exclusion occurs.

The fashion choices hipsters make belong to a greater consumer complex, rather than stand alone personal aesthetic choices. As Granfield continues searching for the correct, and most ironic, hipster fashion, he realizes that "flannelette" will complete his loudly constructed hipster identity. Years ago, if someone was searching for flannel shirts, they would need to look in outdoors shops. In the age of the hipster, look no further than the "fancy pants hipster fashion stores" that have popped up around all shopping districts in the West (Granfield 56). He declines to name the store, but Granfield finds a high-end hipster shop (presumably similar to Urban Outfitters or American Apparel) and searches for a flannelette shirt (see figure 3.1). After settling on a size and color, he takes the shirt to the counter and asks for the prices to which the cashier replies that it costs "A hundred and sixty dollars." Taken aback by the price, Granfield says, "I wasn't paying $160 for a flannelette shirt. There were less than $20 at those discount menswear store…and that price included $19 worth of irony" (Granfield 57). The price, albeit shocking, exposes the capital forces that shape hipster fashion ideals.

Figure 3.1: On the left, Matt Granfield shopping for hipster clothing. On the right, an example of a high-end flannelette shirt, with a "triangle logo and a triangle tag, but instead of a date it has the phrase 'never established'. So unbelievably *alt"* Granfield 64).

Trying to look the part requires hipsters to become docile consumers, and some accept their place in consumption and buy into expensive taste. But their ideologies cast them as rebel consumers, wherein, as Greif points out, an individual adopts "the rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture, convinc[ing] himself that buying the right mass products individualizes him as transgressive. Purchasing the products of authority is thus reimagined as a defiance of authority" (4). Irony and disobedience come at a price. And that price directly benefits, not the consumer, but rather the upper-class producers who capitalize on the aesthetics. The hipster consumer comes to embody what Kenneth Burke refers to as a scapegoat mechanism in reidentification. Since the agent's transformation into a practiced hipster consumer "involves a sloughing off, you may expect to find some variant of killing in the work" (Burke 294). Any subversive qualities that hipsters exhibit are subsumed and diluted when their aesthetic is commercialized, causing the hipster agent to forcibly bear the burdens of consumer culture. By shifting from the possibly subversive to the personification of consumer decadence, the hipster becomes, to borrow Burke's terminology, "the 'scapegoat,' the 'representative' or 'vessel' of certain unwanted evils, the sacrificial animal upon whose back the burden of these evils is ritualistically loaded (Burke 294). Hipster agents, as Granfield exposes, are mitigated by consumer tendencies, which forces them to embody the capitalistic desire of dominant society. Through greater recognition, the hipster identity becomes a sacrificial lamb, which enables the production and consumption of their style for the purposes of profit.

When they were up-and-coming labels, Urban Outfitters and American Apparel capitalized on finding and setting new trends, then making their distinctions stick for their own advantage. Most recently, Urban Outfitters broke through the gloss of youthful subcultural chic and exposed the market of and for the hipster. Conservative businessman Richard Hayne founded and currently operates Urban Outfitters. For years Urban Outfitters (UO) has catered to the young and hip, utilizing hipster interests. As the hipster drive toward irony grew, so did UO's use of ironic hypocrisy to support capital growth and conservatism. One particular incident sets a foundation for the economic issues Matt Granfield faces within the hipster community: in 2012, Urban Outfitters began selling T-shirts with the slogans "Mitt is the Shit" and "2 Legit 2 Mitt." Of course there is nothing wrong with selling these items, except that UO's customer base is typically left-leaning hipsters who wear and interpret the shirts as the ultimate form of irony.

Little do they know that that the CEO of Urban Outfitters, Richard Hayne, supports and even contributes to conservative candidates, most notably Rick Santorum (Kelley). This type of blatant hypocrisy led journalist Lauren Kelley to claim that, "for Hayne, the young people and lefties who shop in his stores are just chumps to whom he can sell $69 peace-sign tank tops while supporting conservative politics" (Kelley). What's the significance of UO's business practices? Businesses have the freedom to produce and market any type of style. But the illuminating function of this fact is in showing that hipster-oriented markets and businesses are no different than any other. Their main objective is profit. Matt Granfield's experience highlights this commodification of hipster culture, because clothing shops have defined hipster and have placed a price point through which the upper class can buy its way into a subculture. Even though Granfield cannot afford passage into the upper echelon of hipster culture, his attempt to pass as hipster reveals the inauthentic aesthetic of the culture, which has become driven by first-

hand dealers, exchanging in the ideal of cool. The rebel consumer, those who might

purchase a $160 flannelette shirt, is not contributing to a counter-culture; rather, he or

she is supporting an establishment of class ideology, cementing his or her role within the

capitalist system as perpetual consumers, commodities for capital gain.

3.1 To Laugh at Being Laughed at

Matt Granfield's trip to the store only touches the surface as to the ways in which

Generation Y is commoditized, commercialized, and forced to compete for social

distinctions of taste. In 2010, Honda began a unique advertising campaign for the

Australian version of the Fit, known elsewhere as the Jazz. Honda's "How much can you

pack in a Jazz" adverts take on different subcultural figures and asks "how much" of their

particular subculture can fit in a Jazz. The most popular version of the ad came to be the

version asking, "How much hipster can you pack in a Jazz." Set against a white

background, alone in a room, sits a small and hip-looking Honda Jazz. As a narrator asks

the aforementioned question, a large group of hipsters with all of their wares (a fixie[6], a

typewriter and a collection of Penguin classic books, as figure 3.2) begin to pile into the

car. A series of stereotypes are playfully mocked and lauded at the same time. While in

the car, the group poses for a picture, but instead of the often-used "cheese," they

exclaim "fair trade." The scene shifts from the interior of the car to the exterior where a

bearded hipster appeals to his "brethren's" sense of reason. In an ironic twist he says to

the audience, "The Honda Jazz. As Jack Kerouac said: 'Great things are not

accomplished by those who yield to trends and fads and popular opinion.' So if all your

friends are riding fixies. Just sayin'" (Honda Jazz, "Honda in Australia is Jazz Packing

Hipsters"). The ad plays upon the over-saturation of stereotypical hipster "individuals,"

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[6] Fixie is the slang term used for a fixed gear bike.

proclaiming in a sense that to be the most individual trendsetter, one break from the pack and buy a Honda Jazz.

How much Hipster can you pack in a Jazz?

Figure 3.2: A gathering of hipsters preparing to pack into a Jazz.

Breaking the fourth wall is not uncommon in video advertising, but the manner in which it is utilized in the Jazz ad breaks down the wall even further. In this particular ad a narrator (a mature-sounding, possibly authoritarian figure) guides the audience through the beginning of the ad. Halfway through, the handsome, Kerouac quoting, flannelette jumper-sporting male breaks the separation of the screen, staring into the camera and evoking a level of intimacy with the audience that suggests a kinship on a subcultural level. Leveling with the audience, stripping away the authoritative barrier, appeals to *Generation Y's* sense of individual worth. The one-on-one interaction suggests to the hipster viewer that he or she is like them. The ad plays to the competition factor that Matt Granfield stumbled upon and that facilitates the commercial expansion of hipster and cool. Hipsters have shown that they desire to hold the untouched and to wear the

unworn, at least untouched by their generation. In following Bourdieu's theory of social distinctions, "all hipsters play at being the inventors or first adopters of novelties: pride comes from knowing, and deciding, what's cool in advance of the rest of the world" (Greif 2). Part mockery, part glorification, the Jazz ad uses the hipster trope of irony to conjure up these inventive feelings of individuality. Simultaneously being made aware of their own frivolity and made to revel in their own ironic identification of said frivolity, the hipster audience further feels separated from "the trend following fixie riders," because they are the first to be ironically ironic by consuming ostensibly novel goods.

The car industry, however, is not the only market to tap into the hipster value based competition for individuation. The music industry ingests hipster tastes and processes them into subtle, and sometimes blatant, ready-to-be consumed packages, furthering the cooption of the hipster by market forces. In 2012, Seattle-based rapper Macklemore released his biggest hit to date, "Thrift Shop." As a song, "Thrift Shop" advocates buying secondhand and looking stylish while doing it. By buying second hand, Macklemore raps that he's "Savin' [his] money and [he's] hella happy that's a bargain" (Macklemore, "Thrift Shop"). As a video, however, the song creates a complex aesthetic identity, grounded in appearance and the need to obtain fashion ideals. Macklemore drapes himself in various thrift shop wares throughout the video, touting each garb's trendiness as the song progresses. Macklemore occupies a position known to author Gregg Easterbrook as "catalog-induced anxiety." Macklemore simultaneously challenges and promulgates the notion that "people can see, in agonizing detail, all the things they will never possess. Catalog-induced anxiety, whether from catalogs themselves or from other forms of public exposure of the lives of the rich or celebrated, may make what a typical person possesses seem paltry" (Easterbook 405). Macklemore provides a means through which his hip audience can achieve his aesthetic status. However, in doing so,

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"Thrift Shop" adheres to the primary function of catalog-induced anxiety, which serves to foster growth, "because it will never be possible to have everything that economics can create" (Easterbrook 402). Even though Macklemore is referring to second-hand styles, the basis still lies in creating a consumer culture, striving to attain cultural and material ascension.

During the first third of the video, he wears a fur coat while dancing with fashionable hipster girls (see figure 3.3). The second verse begins with a challenge to the audience: "What you knowin' about wearin' a fur fox skin?" (Macklemore, "Thrift Shop). In a combination of images and rhetoric, Macklemore implants an ideal, his ideal, breaking down his message to simply ask the viewer if he or she can be him. His message has shifted from "shop smart" to "beat this." Whether they find the style to top Macklemore's in a thrift shop or a high-end hipster shop such as Urban Outfitters, they become written as practiced consumers, expected to consume as they're told, through which industry markers of taste are tested and defined. This mode of cultural capital one-upmanship weighs heavy on the hipster psyche. As McRaney explains,

> Since everything is mass-produced, and often for a mass
>
> audience, finding and consuming things which appeal to your
>
> desire for authenticity is what moves these items and artists and
>
> services up from the bottom to the top – where it can be mass
>
> consumed. Hipsters, then, are the direct result of this cycle of indie,
>
> authentic, obscure, ironic, clever consumerism. (155)

"Thrift Shop" embeds clever, authentic, and ironic modes of consumerism within the minds of the need-to-be-different, *Generation Y*, hipsters. If the challenge is accepted, and invariably it is, then the hipster consumer elevates the capital position of their aesthetic, producing and reproducing them as cogs in the economic machine, even if

their ideology proclaims them to be outside of the "system." ("Thrift Shop" has over
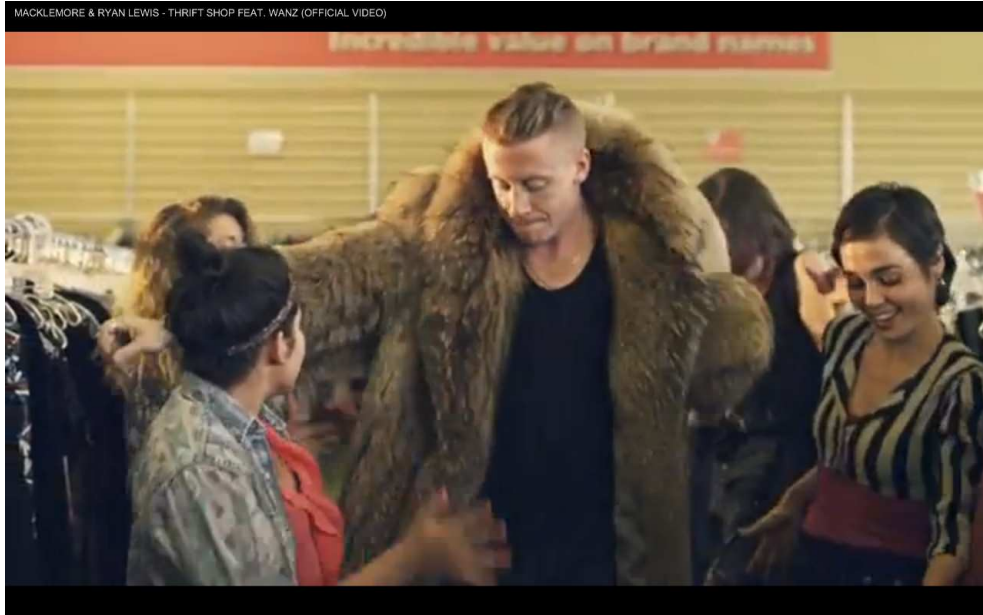
187,000,000 views on YouTube.)

Figure 3.3: Macklemore dancing with hipster girls.

The music industry's economic function transcends the artist, building the

consumption of its product based on its ability to define hipster tastes. After an

unsuccessful market stall where he ended up losing $70, Matt Granfield turns his

attention toward breaking into the indie hipster music scene. Struggling to pin down any

specific formula or sound for which hipsters particularly care, Granfield breaks down and

contacts record labels to find the answer. He discovers that the industry employs artists

and repertoire people whose job is "to smoke cigarettes, drink coffee and read blogs. If

one of the blogs have a good review to a band no one else had signed yet, then they [go]

and [watch] them play a show" and, if they aren't terrible, sign them to a contract

(Granfield 84). Any industry searches for talent, and when courting hipster ears, the

methods may be different, but the end result is the same.

For indie record labels, "being cool and making money are two different things…if they [think] a band [is] going to make them money, they just [get] their publicity department to tell everyone they [are] cool" (Granfield 86). The expansion of the digital share-ready music scene allows for the rapid growth of bands and genres. Pulling from blogs, Twitter pages, and Tumblr blogs, the industry and, consumer alike, can find, generate, compete, and compare tastes. Music theorist Simon Reynolds explains that the ability to instantly share within a community ("sharity," Reynolds's combining of share and community) has led the impetus of musical tastes to shift toward the idea that:

> 'I've just got hold of something no one else has got, so I'm immediately going to make it available to EVERYBODY.' There's a weird mix of competitive generosity and showing off how cool and esoteric your taste is…Knowledge became cultural capital and bloggers became cult figure, 'faces' on the scene, even though their real-world identity was shrouded. (Reynolds 106-107)

Being the first to uncover a band permits the discoverer an influential amount of cultural capital, which structures a hipster-style caste system wherein those who obtain cultural knowledge are allowed to disseminate the "accepted" tastes within the subculture. Herein lie the contradictions of the culture. If we are to assume that the music industry operates as a behind-the-scenes manufacturer of cool, then the discovery made by the hipster either facilitates the industry's ability to find cool, or they only can find the new music, because the industry hides the newly-packaged, to-be-consumed band in plain sight in hopes they will be found and elevated as the "next big thing." The complexity of the collapsing of hipster tastes for the purposes of market share devalues the hipster as an individual rendering them as commoditized objects whose value continually shifts between cultural capital and market capital.

3.2 My *Own* Image

Being essential players in the capitalist exchange, the hipster's relationship to mass marketplaces transcends outward material goods. The hipster and all it entails and implies become the image, becomes the market through which consumer goods are transmitted. When the fashion industry, the music industry, or any other marketplace evokes hipster imagery, they are not selling the clothes or the music, but rather an image. Hipster ideology is hard to singularly define, but their bodies can easily operate and induce or produce the modes of production required to kick-start the economic competition model. Before all seeds are sown, hipsters must become the commodity, they must vicariously believe that their positions are culturally viable and aesthetically pleasing or, in other words, marketable.

As American Apparel shares its birthday with most of generation Y[7], it's safe to say that hipsters grew up with the brand. With what some consider racy advertising, American Apparel (AA) defined how to market to hipsters. Built on a simple set of values, AA views itself as a "'next-generation business,' a company driven by young people's energy, young people's values and young people's style" (Wolf 4). Their print ads take young, natural men and women off the streets and strip them down, leaving them vulnerable, and use their images to seductively sell hipster style. Proud of its scandalous depictions of young people, AA produces ads that are designed to connect with a "hyper" culture, a culture living within and around extremes.

In 2009, AA pushed limits with a now infamous ad. Depicting a young female wearing nothing more than a fleece jacket and short shorts, the ad was attacked by Britain's ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) for what appeared to be a model under the age of sixteen (see figure 3.4).

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[7] American Apparel was founded in 1989.

Figure 3.4: Model Ryan revealing herself, creating a market of the (female) hipster body.

In a series of photographs the young woman, Ryan, slowly reveals more and more, eventually exposing herself for the pictorial. The ad differs greatly from the previous mentions of the transmission of goods usually targeted at hipsters. American Apparel is not selling fleece—they are selling the image of Ryan, by making her identifiable to hipsters.

With her penetrating gaze and inquisitive expression, Ryan invites viewers into her world, and fosters their consumptive desires. Cultural theorist Jack Solomon believes that the function of advertising is to produce, through semiotics, practiced consumers:

> 'Manipulate is the word here, not 'persuade'; for advertising campaigns are not sources of product information, they are exercises in behavior modification. Appealing to our subconscious emotions rather than to our conscious intellects…America's consumer economy runs on desire, and

advertising stokes the engines by transforming common objects… into

signs of all the things that Americans covet most. (Solomon 410)

American Apparel takes the image of a girl and appeals through empathy (empathy

through similarity in age and possible similarity in feelings of objectification), to create a

consumer who desires to embrace the style through the symbolic representation of

sexualized identification. Ryan's visual semiotics signifies an identification within the

audience to remind them what it means to be misinterpreted. For example, a female

viewing the ad will view the emptiness and uneasiness of Ryan's posturing and recall a

possible time and/or situation where they were sexually objectified. The framing of her

compliance effectively sells the image and creates the consumer who can identify not

with the fleece, but with the misunderstood, sexualized girl underneath.

Subconscious desires dictate the transmittance of the cultural and material goods

represented in American Apparel's campaign. Regardless of whether the desire is

constructive or destructive, the simultaneous objectifying gaze of the ad demonstrates

that our current consumer state "is a nation of fantasizers, often preferring the sign to the

substance and easily enthralled by a veritable Fantasy Island of commercial illusions"

(Solomon 413). Ryan's ad is striped of substantial footing and becomes contiguous with a

commercial culture that places cultural and capital value on semiotic symbols of

meanings. The manufacturing of Ryan's image into a body of desire signifies her as

"bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 2085). However, the negative

implications of the use of the female body to sell a brand transcend the semiotic and

reveal the relationship between the so-called producer and the hipster.

The man behind the scenes, the co-founder of American Apparel and the

photographer for the majority of AA ads, Dov Charney demonstrates that not only can an

industry produce an aesthetic, but also that one man can foster a generation of reluctant

consumers based on his personal ideals. Charney calls the shots and he handpicks the

models off the streets. With a typically diverse selection, Jaime Wolf learned "there are

certain things at which [Charney] draws a hard line. Makeup is one. Plucked and trimmed

eyebrows are another. To [Wolf's] surprise, short hair is a third" (Wolfe 4). Ryan fits into

this set of criteria. In her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the*

Body, Susan Bordo demonstrates that "it is the created image that has the hold on our

most vibrant, immediate sense of what *is*, of what matters, of what we must pursue for

ourselves" (Bordo 104). The images offered to the consuming public present an ideal, an

image by which self-identification is achieved. But Charney's personal and capital use of

Ryan's body demonstrates that "the body that we experience and conceptualize is always

mediated by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature" (Bordo 35).

Using Mulvey's theories, one may see how Charney constructs the manner in

which the "subject" is consumed, presenting an inherently one-sided cultural capital

exchange, which transforms into market capital exchange, where males and females

alike share in the identification with Ryan's to-be-looked-at-ness. Inherent in Charney's

image of feminine ideals, the exposed breasts and vulnerable depiction of Ryan becomes

an object for self-identification. For women, the image represents the anxiety of being

gazed upon in a semi-naked, exposed state. For men, Ryan becomes the fetishization of

the control their gaze can provide. The use of Ryan's vulnerability sells the image of the

hipster to the hipster, while at the same time ensuring that the traditional formation "of

mastery and control directed at male consumers" is unbroken (Bordo 105). One man's

vision commodifies an aesthetic, creating a competition factor where an individual is

expected to believe that they can be like her or that they can have her. In turn, they tailor

their buying habits to obtain the cultural ideals created by those possessing the ability to

produce cultural capital.

3.3 Conclusion

Hipsters did not form in a vacuum. Because of their influence within society, capital producers have been able to meticulously tailor a set of consumer values to the ironic consumer. Once hipster individualities hit the mainstream, their identities were coopted by a culture that only understood them in terms of their potential consumer value. To hipsters, however, their value was supposed to be their own. As Paul Mullins writes:

> We live in a moment when every social collective seems to feel marginalized, and the hipster seeks the unfettered experience that we all believe we are denied. Hipsters seek agency in consumption, voicing a critique of consumer culture from the very heart of that culture and breaking from the stereotype of goal-oriented activist politics. (Mullins)

It may appear that they move through the capitalist system apathetically, but their consumption of atypical consumer culture attempts to grant them a position greater to nothing, but different from everything. Effectively, they are attempting to *become*, change, as generations before them have attempted. Unfortunately for them, cultural movement is mitigated by forces outside of their control, compressing and distorting their cultural agency in such a way that makes it palatable for producers. Being a part of all that has come before them and all that is to come, they may truly be the last subculture insomuch as they hoped to dissent and create an original identity, but they can not escape the gravitational pull of consumer culture that simultaneously embeds within them the necessity to reproduce the modes of their own socio-economic production. They now compete for hierarchal standing in a global marketplace that force-feeds them inauthentic manifestations of alternative culture.

New Beginnings

Hipsters are everything and nothing all at once. In the course of my analysis I came to a dualism, discovering that hipsters navigate a thin line between practiced subjects and subversive producers. The complexity of how they come to define themselves stems from their multiplicity of previous aesthetics and ideologies from which they have to choose. They represent the fight for difference in a world that assimilates through anonymity. Media theorist Douglass Rushkoff writes that:

> Our digital experiences are out of body. This biases us toward depersonalised behaviour in an environment where one's identity can be a liability. But the more anonymously we engage with others, the less we experience the human repercussions of what we say and do. By resisting the temptation to engage from the apparent safety of anonymity, we remain accountable and present - and are much more likely to bring our humanity with us into the digital realm. *(79)*

The complication of not only living, but also being birthed in the post-analog digital age is the movement toward depersonalization and the rise of hyper-individuality through the incessant displays of one's tastes. As the generation that is supposed to embrace the collapse into anonymity, their direct opposition to falling into place causes their identities to be interpreted as inauthentic because they build them from outside their own culture and from the past. Yet, their desire to express themselves follows Rushkoff's call for the retention of humanity in an increasingly digital world. When it comes to balancing individuality and maintaining a digital presence, hipsters set the mark. The digital realm provides them with a space to express their musical tastes, fashions, and ideologies. Their tastes are a complex combination of previous subcultures, stretching their identities thin and causing them to more easily fall into typical gender, sex, and economic roles.

With instant access to all cultural goods that came before them, hipsters have become an amalgamation of the good and bad of society. With irony functioning as their defense mechanism, guarding hipsters against potential consternation for their beliefs or tastes, hipsters are expected to insincerely consume material objects. Often, they consume for the sake of consumption, partaking in goods and actions that create a perceived selfishness, and lack of personal conviction. In truth, the negative depictions (such as Tony's use of irony to control or the consumption of expensive hipster-styled clothing) are exactly that—depictions—because in reality being a part of Haddow's "lost generation" entails belonging to an authenticity of nothing and everything. Ezra Koenig, lead singer of the popular indie band Vampire Weekend, had a propensity for expensive clothing as a teen. He consumed what was popular as a part of searching for his "authentic" self. As he grew older he asked himself:

> What is authentic for a guy like me? Fourth-generation Ivy
>
> League, deracinated, American Jew born on the UWS, raised in NJ to
>
> middle-class post-hippie parents with semi-Anglophilic tendencies AND
>
> propensity to put on Eastern European accents and use obscure
>
> Yiddish phrases. The obvious answer is that I, like all of us, should be a
>
> truly post-modern consumer, taking the bits and pieces I like from
>
> various traditions and cultures, letting my aesthetic instincts be my only
>
> guide. In fact, all of my friends…seem to be in the same boat. We are
>
> BOTH disconnected from AND connected to EVERYTHING. Now we've
>
> transcended mere clothes. (Koenig, "PREP-osterous")

Koenig, as a proverbial voice of his generation, represents the complexity and anxiety of becoming. Nevertheless, a diverse background in not required, but it does help in order for youths to feel the anxiety to *be*. Emerging in a time and place bombarded with a

multiplicity of cultural signs and signifiers, Generation Y is full of post-modern consumer, struggling to pin down an identity, an 'authentic self.' Sometimes it works. Sometimes it does not. Often, it is either misinterpreted or misrepresented by outsiders and by hipsters alike. Outside culture writes and defines them, but the instability Koenig alludes toward helps to foster the cynicism surrounding the hipster's cultural existence.

Finding a semblance of stability in an instable world leaves the hipster in a constant state of flux. Looking toward the future, the hipster grasps hold of generations past. Their constant search and fluid identity creates a culture of cynicism. They view themselves as countering the dominant culture, but they are invariably recycled back into the "system." This begs the question: Do hipsters devalue their authenticity, because they fail to grasp their *present* condition–their existence as embodied subjects–or does the dominant culture surrounding and defining them view them only in terms of their potential value? They're not taken seriously, because they do not take themselves seriously. They consume kitsch and produce apathy. They have become the scapegoat generation partly because they appear to provide nothing *new* to society, as dominant cultural and capital forces subsume their identity. For all of the negative characterizations an equal number of positivity exists. While they may not be post-gender (as they exhibit misogyny and partake in derogatory sexual roles) or even post-consumer (as they become capitalized subjects), they acknowledge their embodiment and uniquely navigate a system that continually attempts to deny them agency, trying to become *post*. They subscribe to a uniquely postmodern problem were nothing new can be created, rather they build upon previously subversive materials in order to form a blended identity that exists within and outside mainstream culture. Hipsters are a generation using the past to shape their future, not getting caught up in the *now*, because "the minute the 'now' is apprehended, it has already passed…the more forcefully we attempt to stop the passage of time, the less

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available we are to the very moment we seek to preserve" (Rushkoff xi). They are looking

for agency in a past that does and does not belong to them. Their insincere identities

arise because they had to construct their movement and agency. Parodies of a culture of

instant gratification, their rejection of their own culture causes an anxiety for those outside

of the subculture and leads to the conflation of what is means to be a subculture. Only

time will tell if their condition improves or if they can transcend the present and achieve

authenticity out of chaos. They have succeeded, however, at demonstrating a new

manner of forming identities. The hipster embraces the current cultural climate and

provides the first steps in changing how identities and subcultures are formed.

Appropriation is the key. Hipsters are merely experimenting within a postmodern society

that draws from too many sources for anything *new* to form. The legacy of the hipster will

not rest on their ability to break off from dominant society. On the contrary, their cultural

significance will last because of their ability to embrace inauthenticity and their attempt to

use a myriad of pre-existing symbols in their creation of individuality, critiquing dominant

culture from the inside out. But, right *now*, as subjects and dissenters built by everything

and nothing all at once, the cultural moment belongs to them, because the tastes, trends,

and markets revolve around their existence and their position within mainstream society.

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