

The Stylistic Significance of the “Hippie” Youth Subculture

—Using the Woodstock Festival as a Case Study

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Abstract

The article takes one of the most classic subcultural movements, the Woodstock Festival, as a case study to analyse the style and meaning of the “hippie” subculture. Woodstock created a cultural circle of hippies, bringing them together with “rock music” and “sex”. Through the methods of contextual research, individual behavioural analysis and literature research, the article concludes with the hippies’ subcultural pursuits, attitudes to life, and the dismantling of certain views or sexual stereotypes of the time. The “hippie” subculture was distinguished by its opposition to war, the pursuit of total emancipation and extreme expression of individuality. This cultural practice had a certain sense of ritual resistance, in which the stereotypes and traditional values that were present in the larger society were opposed, transgressed, and subverted by them, while at the same time, their own identity had been completely constructed. As this cultural practice devolved, some of it has been commercially incorporated and survived through mainstreaming, while others have been under cultural siege and gradually deteriorated and vanished. Despite the hippie movement’s brief existence in American history, its transgressions and rebellions still have learning values for people today.

Keywords

Hippie, Youth Subculture, Style, Woodstock Festival, Counterculture Movement

1. Motivation, Research Questions and Research Methods

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham introduced the concept of “class” into the study of youth subcultures, and through the study of the meaning of “style” (the symbolic system of a

group's particular way of life), the school studied how subcultures "resists" the mainstream culture and how the mainstream culture "incorporates" the subculture. This paper aims to examine the deviance and identity of youth subculture groups through the hippie cultural movement of the Woodstock Rock Festival.

The formation of subculture styles is linked with the rebellion and collage of mainstream culture. These styles give their pursuers a distinct character, identity and worldview. The symbols by which the "hippies", who were brought to the fore at Woodstock, presented their distinctive style are, according to Dick Hebdige, a sociologist of the CCCS, "the product of deliberation rather than accidental piecing together". Thus, the questions that arise in this paper are: What are the symbols through which the "hippie" subculture style is expressed and what are its characteristics? What is the significance of the construction of this subculture style? What is the crisis facing this subculture of resistance through rituals in the face of hegemonic cultural incorporation?

Woodstock Rock Festival, the classic movement of the "hippie" rebellion against mainstream culture, has been hailed by *Rolling Stone* as one of the "50 moments that changed the history of rock music". As the largest open-air music festival in American history, the hippies were the "hosts" and "participants" of this event. To everyone's surprise, this "Beat Generation" group created a series of fresh and unique music and events in a fearful society. Along with the music, the camera captured 450,000 strong banners of "peace, anti-war, fraternity, and equality" which were raised with flowers, tears, and laughter.

The term "Hippie" originated with the character called "Hipsters" in the 1957 novel *The White Negro* by American author Norman Mailer and was popularised by journalist Herb Caine of *The San Francisco Chronicle*. This category of "rebellious people" became known as "hippies". They were a continuation of the so-called "Beat Generation" of the 1950s. The theory of the "youth subculture" was first developed in the 1920s by Robert E. Park, a sociologist of the Chicago School, in his study of the aberrant behaviour and identity of marginalised urban groups.

In this paper, the term "Hippie" is used to refer to a subcultural phenomenon and a group of people who promote "Hippie Culture". In terms of research methodology, to conduct a thorough and accurate analysis of the topic of the Woodstock Festival and the hippies (its hosts and participants), the article will first take a qualitative analysis method by summarising the historical context and interpreting the behavioural characteristics of individual hippies. It will then use a documentary research method in combination with sociological scholars' perspectives, including but not limited to the Chicago School and the Birmingham School, to further analyse the "hippie" youth subculture and the anti-mainstream cultural movement behind the subject.

2. Characteristics of Research Subjects

2.1. Subcultures and the Mainstream Culture

The concept of subculture was first introduced by the American sociologist Mil-

ton Gordon in the 1940s, who argued that “A subculture is a subset of national culture that includes a combination of social elements such as class status, ethnic background, geographical differences and religious affiliation, but which are integrated into a functional whole and have a comprehensive impact on its members (Gelder & Thornton, 1999).” J. Milton Yinger distinguishes between two types of subculture: The first type refers to a culture in which the norms of behaviour of the group differ from those of the larger group to which it belongs, for example in terms of language and religion (Yinger, 1960). The second type refers to a culture where the group’s relationship with the larger group to which it belongs is strained or even in conflict, resulting in specific norms of behaviour. He refers to the latter subculture as a counter-culture and points out that such sub-cultural groups can develop a range of values that are subversive to or opposed to those of society.

Overall, the mainstream culture is the one that plays a leading role in a cultural system and the subculture refers to sub-regions within a larger cultural region that have distinctive cultural characteristics which includes age, stock, region or occupation. Research topics in subcultures often include immigration and racial issues, deviant behaviour and crime, age-specific subcultures, gender subcultures, regional subcultures, etc.

2.2. The Subcultural Movements

The subcultural movement is also known as the counter-cultural movement, its rise is inextricably linked to the times in which it took place: the 1950s and 1960s. This was a period of concentrated development of anti-mainstream cultural movements, such as “the Swinging Sixties” in Europe, “the May Storm” in France, “the Left-wing” in Japan and “the Hippie Movement” in the US.

The reasons for the occurrence of the US’s “Hippie Movement” were related to the social environment and the youth population. In terms of the social environment, the United States enjoyed unheard-of economic prosperity after the Second World War, but the pursuit of hedonism exacerbated a wealth gap that already existed. Additionally, people were also mired in a bubble of consumerist desires and materialistic pursuits, and the world of the mind had long since become arid and empty. In terms of the young generation, the American sociologist Richard Flacks has astutely pointed out that they are a “generation growing up in confusion (Gottlieb & Flacks, 1972)”. When the “baby boom” generation’s children grew into adults, they discovered that the indulgent, individualistic education they had received since childhood was at odds with the oppressive situation of racial discrimination and unequal treatment in society. In addition, they had not lived through the Great Depression or the Second World War, so they could not understand the hardships their fathers had endured. After that, they stopped adhering to conservative values from their parents and started looking for more independent thoughts and more unrestrained ways of living, for example, by becoming more receptive to social changes and taking group ac-

tivities instead of one-to-one dates (Jones, 2008). Different social circumstances influence how people perceive things. These young people were able to come together, develop a shared consciousness, and come to an agreement on a strategy thanks to the expansion of university education at the time, eventually forming a force known as a counter-mainstream cultural movement.

2.3. The Woodstock Festival

As one of the most iconic subcultural movements, the Woodstock Rock Festival in 1969 brought the counter-culture movement to its peak, which was also the biggest and most successful event for hippies. For the three days the festival took place, 450,000 music fans gathered in the small place of Bethel. The hippies had no quarrels or conflicts in the cramped space and hostile environment. Instead, they were immersed in a world of drug usage and free sex freely, which was unacceptable to the mainstream. During those three days, the anti-war slogan “Make love, no war” was spread throughout the venue. Bands took to the stage day and night, and young people sang and danced in the mud, choosing the purest way to feel the lack of care and equality in mainstream society, and expressing their outrage and displeasure with the US government’s Vietnam War policies.

These people openly discussed and promoted rock and sex, two of the most emblematic aspects of “hippie” culture, as a reaction against mainstream lines of thought at the Woodstock Festival. This event provided them with a venue for getting to know one another, coming together and actively contributing to the development of the reactionary “hippie” subculture. Its popularity gave the hippies the confidence that more similar events would unite people who shared their anti-mainstream cultural beliefs and bring about a major revolt against the US government’s war policies.

3. The Construction of Style in the “Hippie” Subculture

Dick Hebdige argues that the study of subculture requires “looking beyond the surface of style to its underlying meaning (Hebdige, 2013)”. The hippies’ goals matched their style and fashion. Therefore, this article has chosen to describe the stylistic characteristics of “hippies” through the rock music and sexuality of Woodstock.

3.1. Specific Manifestations of the Hippie Style

Through qualitative analysis, the article selects the two most iconic aspects of the hippie movement, the rock revolution and the sexual revolution, to study the style of this subculture and to try to interpret what the hippie youth cared about and what they thought inside through the concept of “style”.

In terms of family background, the majority of hippies were well-educated from a young age and hailed from middle-class homes. Instead of protesting politically, as members of the New Left and the Civil Rights Movement did, they

tried to rebuild their “Garden of Eden” through an unconventional lifestyle of rock “n” roll and the sexual revolution and challenged those mainstream values in a subversive way.

3.1.1. Rock “n” Roll

Rock music is the most obvious outward expression of the hippie style. Nowadays, Rock has evolved into more than just music, it has become a cultural symbol (Anderson, 2012).

The late 1950s saw a surge of discontent with the incumbent social conditions and a lack of understanding of their parents, which led young people to look for a sound that represented their voices. At this time, rock “n” roll’s strong rhythmic and innovative vocal style happened to become the answer to youth’s needs. It was the Beatles who made the biggest contribution to the counter-cultural movement, defying convention and questioning society with lyrics that resonated with young people. The hippies were inspired by the unconventional form of music of the Beatles to develop their new method of counter-cultural resistance, employing this deafening music to awaken people to the realities of the world (Farber & Digital, 2012).

Thirty-two concerts were conducted over the course of the three days of the 1969 Woodstock Festival, with performances by artists such as Creedence Clearwater Revival, Joan Bates, Santana, Janis Joplin, and other well-known rock acts. Additionally, through sound and behaviour, the hippies transformed rock from a simple kind of music into a way of life. People could not help but “rock” and “roll” to this music because of its potent rhythms and melodies, which led to an increase in the number of hippies. Semanticist named Theodore Roszak saw rock music as a vehicle for a message that adhered to the love of American youth, loneliness, alienation, the process of finding the true nature of humanity and the attempts to establish a way of behaving oneself. Hippies managed to subvert conventional values and lifestyles and establish a new way of life based on counter-cultural principles once rock and roll gained enough momentum.

3.1.2. Sexual Liberation

If rock and roll inspired the hippies with its rhythm and melody, the love and freedom lurking in the lyrics perfectly illustrated their quest for sexual liberation. From The Beatles’ “love me do” to Woodstock’s “Make love, no war”, the hippies started a revolution in sexual liberation. Firstly, hippies considered sex to be a natural inclination for pleasure and a sensuous urge (Steigerwald, 1995). With the aid of sex, people could get a new sublimation from the satisfaction of rock and roll and drugs. Secondly, hippies saw sex as freedom: it could take place between heterosexuals as well as homosexuals. By protesting and submitting petitions, they have brought homosexuality from a deliberately shunned “no-go” zone into the public eye, challenging existing laws and demanding changes. Along with successfully altering attitudes toward sexuality and behaviour, the hippies also contributed to a rising acceptance of their novel concept of love and

freedom.

At the Woodstock Festival in 1969, hippies adopted “Make love, no war” as their slogan and were free to have sex regardless of time, place or gender (Morrison & Morrison, 2001). They expressed their protest against traditional values and the government’s war policy with practical actions.

3.2. Construction of Style

3.2.1. Collage and Isomorphism of Symbols

When it comes to interpreting the term “hippie”, the term is often deconstructed for better theoretical explanation and understanding: The word “Hippie” is a compound word which consists of “Hip” and “Pie”. “Hip” means “knowing” and “Pie” means “of a person”. “Hippie” is a collage of words that gives it a new meaning: “a person who understands”. Hippies, as the term implies, were conscious of the problems of society (e.g. the disparity between rich and poor, the trap of consumerism) and of what was happening around them (e.g. the civil rights, the Vietnam War). After witnessing what the hippies saw as the insanity and disorder of American society as well as the blindness and depravity of the masses, they decided to be conscious people and wanted to “build a new world” by starting a movement against traditional values and lifestyles—a counter-mainstream culture movement (Dudley, 1997).

The hippies sought to improve the sick society. When they discovered that society had lost its original rationality under the control of so-called rationalism, politics and technology, they resorted to irrational means, choosing “rock”, “sex” and even “drugs” as their weapons to awaken the numbed world. In the view of Stuart Hall, the father of contemporary cultural studies: “the objects selected, whether in other original or modified forms, have an isomorphic relationship with the subculture’s focus, activities, group structures and collective self-image”.

Hippies collaged old symbols and recreated them in a way that gave new meaning to what had previously been seen as abnormal. “Long hair” was no longer an uncivilised act; “Wearing trousers” was no longer a male image but a right to dress as one pleased; “Homosexuality” was no longer a demonised or stigmatised group; “Coming out” was no longer an act of “deviance” but rather a commendable act of facing one’s true self; “Sex” was no longer something to be ashamed of and shunned but rather something that was openly discussed and even shared.

From the actions and movements of the hippies in their quest for self-fulfilment, people can benefit a lot from these valuable questioning spirits they owned, such as critical thinking, which will provide people with a fresh and quite different considering approach to specific issues.

3.2.2. The Relevance of Style

As a distinct culture initiated by non-mainstream groups based on their cohe-

sion, subculture is not a manifestation of utter decadence and moral degradation, although it is often perceived as an aberration from mainstream culture. According to CCCS scholars, subculture frequently “resist” the prevailing culture by forging their own identities.

1) Identity Construction and Identification

The development of identities occurs later in life rather than from birth. Since it combines personal and social characteristics, it can be divided into primary and secondary identities: The former is frequently an ethnic identity, linked to the early stages of a person’s life, while the latter is a more social identification of the self with the addition of social roles, occupations, and social status. Everyone is born with a primary identity: as a subject of self-consciousness, one can only respond to the question “Who am I?” after establishing his/her identity. However, when people are dissatisfied with their primary identity, they become confused, ambivalent or even rebellious and seek a new identity, which is how subcultures come into being.

By constructing one’s identity, the “hippie” subculture serves as a means of “transgressing” and “resisting” modern society. The Woodstock Rock Festival in 1969 was the moment which truly defined the hippies as a subculture. A large number of young people who identified with hippie culture had come to the festival. It was here that they solidified their cultural community, incorporating rock “n” roll music with the free-sex values of the Summer of Love; it was here that they discovered like-minded individuals, a sense of belonging, and a shared identity.

Immediately afterwards, in the 1970s, hippies set up communes that framed their collective lives. Here they wore rustic dresses and jeans, wore their hair long and identified with the hippie way from the bottom of their hearts: Be free to share anything. In the commune, the hippies not only liberated their minds and lifestyles which had previously been controlled by traditional society but also found a sense of existence with their ideals.

2) Deviance and Resistance

The term “deviance” refers to behaviour that is contrary to the prevailing values and norms of society. The concept can be used to describe both individual behaviours that break the mould at a given point in time and deviations from the socially accepted “norm” or “acceptable” activities of a group. By comparing the hippie generation with the environment in which their parents grew up, it is easier to understand the reasons for their deviant behaviours. The majority of hippies grew up in a relatively comfortable social setting compared to their parents, fully experiencing the pleasures of the burgeoning economy and materialistic pursuits of 1960s American culture. They developed a strong sense of alienation when they found it difficult to understand the struggles endured by their parents, such as the Great Depression and World War II. As the ideas of the two generations continued to clash, the hippies abandoned traditional values in search of their values and new ways of living.

Resistance, which accompanies deviance, is linked to the fact that the real social order has a huge impact on the ideal world of these deviant people and poses a degree of threat to it. The dissatisfaction with the ongoing Vietnam War, as well as the repressive environment of the Cold War, developed a sense of threat among the hippies. They were terrified that they might at any time be called to battle and even perish in this unjust war. After their fright, they could not help but question the justification of the war and revolt against society (Wasson & Roszak, 1970). With flowers in their hands and making appeals for love, they seek to safeguard their future by making efforts to change the war policy.

According to Chicago scholars, “Deviance” is “labelling”: a label imposed on the disadvantaged by the powerful in society. The scholar Howard Becker uses the term “outsiders” to refer to people who are labelled by powerful institutions of social control (Kerckhoff & Becker 1964). They break the established rules of society to become social “stirrers”. For those who establish the rules, they become transgressors. Thus, “deviance” is a label imposed on the disadvantaged by the powerful sectors of society. Hippies could not instantly fight back against the labels they were given since their strength was ultimately insignificant in the face of mainstream society. They were perceived by conventional society as a group of outcasts with long hair and odd clothing. What is more, society also saw them as deviating from mainstream culture by taking drugs, obsessing over rock and roll, living in groups and engaging in the sexual revolution.

4. The Incorporation

According to Hebdige: “The creation and founding of a new style are closely linked to the process of production, promotion and packaging. This inevitably erases the subversive power of the subculture (Hebdige, 2013).” From confrontation to relief, from resistance to incorporation, this is the cycle of development of every subculture. In the era of traditional subcultural studies, as “hippie” culture evolved, some of it was commercially co-opted and “hippies” gradually assimilated into society and survived; the others declined and died out. While in today’s postmodern media environment, with the development of the Internet and globalization, the mainstream culture tends to lose its centrality and the relationship between subculture and media shifts from incorporating and being incorporated to integration and symbiosis.

4.1. Incorporation in Traditional Subcultural Studies Era

4.1.1. Commercial Incorporation: The Mainstreaming of “Hippies”

The survival of the “hippie” subculture is partly attributable to its effective commercial incorporation, which involves turning the hippy look into a consumer good. While this was happening, some components or characteristics of hippie culture were successfully assimilated into mainstream culture and became a certain part of it.

Firstly, there was the mainstreaming of fashion. The uniqueness of the hip-

pies' attire, from long hair to jeans, was successful in drawing a significant number of copycats. Instead of being seen as uncivilised, having long hair has become a free personal choice; Instead of being seen as underground or shameful, wearing jeans and bikinis has become a "decadent style" leading the way. Jeans, one of the most recognisable emblems of mainstream dress, have gone from being seen as bizarre to becoming ubiquitous. With their soul for individuality and freedom, the hippies were adamantly opposed to judging a person's social status based on their clothing.

Furthermore, "rock and roll" has formally infiltrated mainstream culture after several modifications. From the 1960s, when hippies used rock as a weapon against mainstream culture, to its commercialisation and becoming a means of making money and operating a business in mainstream society; from the rebellious lyrical content and alternative performance forms originally fought by mainstream culture to the gradually popularised content and forms, rock was successfully adopted by commerce and completed its integration with mainstream culture, becoming popular music among ordinary people.

4.1.2. Cultural Siege: Free-Wheeling Alternative Lifestyles Cause Social Problems

The anti-war ideology of the hippies vanished with the end of the Vietnam War, leaving only an increasing indulgence in sex, hallucinogens, and drugs. They eventually lost all sense of self-will and the fierce hippie movement has been in decline under intense siege from mainstream culture.

On the one hand, the hippies' over-indulgence led to a significant negative impact on society. The prevalence of drugs led to a sharp rise in crimes such as robbery, rape and theft among young people, which contributed to the disruption of social order. At the same time, sexual liberation has distorted youth values, with teenage pregnancy and the spread of AIDS becoming increasingly serious.

On the other hand, the shortcomings of the hippies' irrational means of confronting the mainstream culture were exposed. They steadfastly believed that rebellion meant doing everything that other people were frightened to do or did not agree with, completely rejecting the principles of traditional society and fooling themselves into thinking they could create their kingdom free from the realities of civilisation. However, without society's support, they could not find references and people to communicate with, and lost themselves in their intoxication, becoming "islands" in the truest sense of the word. Thus, the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s was destined to perish, much like a firework that, despite its splendour, was short-lived and eventually decayed.

Apart from the hippie movement, even the Woodstock festival has never been revived. Its success in 1969 made the public aware of its hidden, huge commercial value. More and more people tried to reproduce this musical event for profit starting in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the opposite was true: the Woodstock 99 in Rome, New York, was so profit-driven that the organisers did not care about the chaotic management, and there was so much violence and sexual abuse that an-

gry fans even set fire to the event in protest. Times and social life have changed, and no one can go back to the hardships of the 1960s. Thus, in the imaginations of all hippies, Woodstock 1969 was elevated to the status of a timeless classic that was hard to replicate.

4.2. Incorporation in Postmodern Era

The emergence of the Internet has altered the dominant position of traditional mainstream culture. It changed the media environment consisting of television, radio and newspapers, which were mainly one-way communication, to a media environment with strong post-modern characteristics. The first manifestation of this media environment is the deconstruction of centrality. Compared to the traditional media, the Internet media has greatly reduced the presence of the centre, emphasizing pluralism, and the subcultures such as the hippies that were marginalized by the mainstream in the traditional media era have gained access to the media, moving from the margins to the multi centers. Through the Internet, hippies are no longer suppressed and co-opted by the mainstream culture, they build their own virtual communities and platforms on the Internet, thus bypassing the control of the mainstream culture and freely spreading hippie culture around the world.

On the other hand, along with the global expansion of the Internet, the media environment it has constructed has taken on a postmodern character. Firstly, the decentralization of the media environment, brought about by the underlying technological logic of the Internet. With the emergence and mass diffusion of Internet technology, personal computers and mobile phones, the technological centre that had been monopolized by the social elite was rapidly dissolved. In the Internet ecosystem, these hippies, once considered “the marginalized”, have become users of the same order of magnitude as the former mainstream, and they may even surpass them as the main users of social media. Secondly, the Internet has deconstructed the “centre-edge” structure built up by the traditional media, which was centred on the communicator, empowering the audience, blurring the identity of the communicator and the recipient, and generalizing the power of communication. The hippies shifted from their previous status of only being passive recipients and initiators of resistance, and became active purveyors of information, spreading the hippie spirit without restriction and having a worldwide impact. Thirdly, the post-modern media environment constructed by the Internet has deconstructed traditional identities, and a more pluralistic and fluid identity of interest emerging, with identity taking on a post-modern tribal character. Because of their common feelings and ideas, hippies met and formed a subculture tribe in the Internet. Because of the transfer of feelings, supporters of other cultures moved from the original tribe to the new tribe and joined the hippie subculture.

5. Conclusion: The Contemporary Relevance of the “Hippie”

Although the hippies’ extreme and idealistic approach to solving the issues fac-

ing contemporary society inevitably resulted in their failure, their questioning of the legitimacy of the mainstream culture, and deviance from it, give them great significance and means we have much to learn from the study of them.

As a reaction to and rejection of orthodoxy, while the hippie movement improved some positive effects, its demerits should not be ignored. It is indispensable to note that many of the “revolutions” that the hippies vowed to make at the beginning of the movement did not happen, and that the hippies’ ambitious attempts to subvert the values of American orthodoxy were largely unrealized. This was due to a number of external factors, such as the ridicule, siege and suppression of the mainstream, as well as its absorption, assimilation and incorporation. But more importantly, the hippies’ perception of mainstream society was seriously skewed and biased. In addition, the hippies were too simplistic and naive in their forms of resistance, sometimes even bordering on ignorance and absurdity. In this respect, the hippie movement could hardly be called a successful movement. However, despite the fact that the hippies did not achieve their “revolutionary” goals, their analysis and criticism of the mainstream American society’s obsession with reason, materialism, suppression of individuality and greed for resources were quite profound and sharp.

The “deviant” behaviour of the hippies deserves serious consideration and reflection by all those who live in a modern, rational society. As a deviation from “normal”, it also has social value: Firstly, “deviance” can be innovative, introducing fresh perspectives and ideals to society, challenging long-standing traditions and customs. Secondly, when subcultural movements elicit negative responses, they can act as a cautionary tale and a wake-up call to the reality of the prevailing laws and value structures, aiding us in determining the best route to our ideal “utopia.”

Last but not least, the deviations of the hippie movement are also something valuable: We are learning from deviance and, by better understanding it, we would be able to fully evolve and be human beings in the truest meaning of the word and not just “One-Dimensional Man”, as Marcuse puts it, if we all accepted reason as the ultimate source of truth and rejected all illogical elements. This is what the hippie movement has taught us as modern humans and the most meaningful historical legacy it has left us.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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