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Expository Writing

10 February 2023

Exploring the Influence of Pop Music and Social Groups on Self-Definition

In the modern age of mass media and communication technology, a lot of attention is paid to identity and to an individual's perception of themselves. Modern people are constantly seeing and expressing themselves in art, the internet, social outing, advertising, and the other diverse planes of the information age. An individual's definition of self is a more complex issue than it seems on the surface. People typically assume they understand their self definition well. However in practice, they typically define themselves through music subcultures, meeting places, or other elements of social groups. By examining music subcultures such as punk, and social groups such as Manchester's Gay Village, it can be seen that music and social groups can effect an individual's definition of self to the extent that they become the method of definition.

Subcultures regularly articulate themselves through music. By examining the ways in which they do this, it is clear that the effect music subcultures have on an individual's definition of self is that music becomes the vector which the individual defines themselves as belonging to the group. American philosopher and professor Alva Noë writes that "pop music is concerned with personal style... We sort tribes by their music. The hippies, the punks, the jocks, the mods, the rockers, etc. Black music, white music. These differences matter." (Noë 178). Considering each of the tribes, or subcultures, it's easy to connect the music and stereotypical images of them; Hippies conjure images of the Grateful Dead and tie dye, and punks bring to

mind the Dead Kennedies and patched battled vests. Individuals express themselves with their choices of music, fashion, and politics. However this process works just as strongly, if not more strongly, when pointed inwards; when those individuals define themselves, they use the signs of music, and thereby fashion. One who enjoys punk music comes to consider themselves a punk. Punk becomes their identity, the set of essential qualities and character they differentiate themselves with. That quality and character becomes those expressed in punk. They then seek out further engagements that are in line with those aspects of their identity. In this case it may be rock concerts, battle vests, and radical, anti-authoritarian politics. This phenomenon is present with many other groups, such as hippies, jocks, mods, and rockers, as well as goths, emos, ravers, metalheads, and still countless other subcultures. The center many of these groups is the music. In some groups, such as goth, the music can even become the primary definition of the group. A “real” punk acts a certain way. Punk is more concerned with politics, and attitude. Music, for punk, is a means to that end; a means to spread a political message or express the punk spirit. A “real” goth might look and act in the stereotypical way, with black clothes and makeup, a brooding nihilistic attitude, and the classic updos. However goths are typically more focused on the music. Music more thoroughly composes the definition of goth than it does punk. In the end, music still makes up a large portion of either definition. Nearly every subculture will latch onto music of some kind, and members use that music to define themselves and bring themselves more in line with the social group.

Furthermore, pop as an art form is solely dedicated to this aim of style. By examining how music becomes tailored to the specific subculture, it is evident that pop music is not just impactful, but is a powerful tool of self definition. When describing pop music as a whole, Noë states “that pop music is an art of personal style, that with pop, the music is a vehicle

for work done in a different medium, the medium of style” (Noë 180). Noë makes it clear that the actual sounds of pop are in service to its task of communicating its style. With most music subcultures, the styles, such as hippie and punk, are evident. However it is critical to observe that music is the medium, the carrier, for this style. The sound of pop music is tailored around the aim of expressing style. Consider punk music: it is typically loud and fast, using minimal if any studio work, as well as loose and shrill vocals. These auditory qualities express the style of punks, such as being self-made, tough, and iconoclastic. Punk individuals, as members of the punk social group, use punk music as a way to define themselves. This forms a pattern, in which punks make music through which they define themselves, then make more music expressing the same kind of style. New punks are attracted to the music, join the subculture, take on the style of the subculture, and continue the pattern. The same principle is true for hippies, goths, ravers and many others. Noë considers this use of music, to express style, as the quintessential element of pop. This kind of music is more than just pretty sounds; it forms a language of style. It is this language that individuals use to define themselves. Without pop music, punk and other subcultures would not have this major tool for its members to inwardly identify themselves. Because pop music is centered around style, it is almost obvious why it has such a profound impact on an individual’s sense of self.

A similar phenomenon can happen with geography, instead of music. By examining the locations social groups gather in, it is clear that the belonging to a social group defines a pattern of social conventions and thereby part of an individual’s self. Steven Johnson, famous American science author writes about another subculture with a strong social group, one not defined through music, rather by their reception of state violence. Johnson writes “Manchester harbors several such secret [patterns], persisting over the course of many generations... One of

them lies just north of Victoria University, at a point where Oxford Road becomes Oxford Street. There are reports dating back to the mid-nineteenth century of men cruising other men on these blocks, looking for casual sex, more lasting relationships, or even just the camaraderie of shared identity at a time when that identity dared not speak its name.” (Johnson 195). When gay men gather on Oxford Road, they are participating in the tradition of Manchester’s gay population. Meeting in the same place is often a pragmatic decision, however when participating in this tradition, gay Mancunians are putting themselves into the tradition. By doing this, they become part of a group, and define themselves inwardly with that group’s identity. This effect is so powerful that to this day, that area of Manchester is known for its gay population, and now openly labels itself the Gay Village. For hundreds of years, gay Mancunians have gathered at this place to meet other gay Mancunians, and this place becomes an expression of their repressed identity. This is analogous to music subcultures. Consider the similarities between punks gathering around loud, rebellious music, meeting other punks, and defining themselves with the music in the process and gay men gathering around particular street corners for social engagement, and becoming part of the community in the process. Today the Gay Village can exist openly and explicitly. However, its history as an inconspicuous, even secret meeting place remains. The significance of being in that place stems from the tradition of the social group. It is clear gay Mancunians define themselves through the conventions that they have participated in, specifically in meeting on Oxford Road.

Pop music and social gathering places have a effect on an individual's definition of self by becoming those individuals’ definitions. This is evident in music subcultures, such as punk, hippie, and goth, as well as in Manchester’s historic Gay Village. In both cases a stable pattern occurs in which individuals participate in the same activities. These activities are then

used by the individuals to define themselves. Those individuals make art, music, advertising, and other media expressing the style of their identities. That media then becomes the definition they apply to themselves. The individuals then defines themselves through what music they like, the style that music express, and through the locations their social groups gather.