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From having to appearing : identity, abstraction, and commodification in online social networking sites

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FROM HAVING TO APPEARING: IDENTITY, ABSTRACTION, AND COMMODIFICATION IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

by

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From Having to Appearing: Identity, Abstraction and Commodification in Online Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to explore the effects of social networking / 'sticky' sites, such as MySpace.com, on traditionally held conceptions of subculture. Having been initially limited to text, the now ubiquitous setting of social networking sites allows us to digitally reconstruct ourselves through a pastiche-like approach. Through the abstractive processes outlined by Guy Debord, the modern online subcultural subject is able to create a digital 'self' though a series of pictorial, textual, and multi-media (music, and video) based inclusions. In doing so, these inclusions become abstracted into 'spectacular' representations of self, where mere appearance becomes key. In presenting the processes that take place in the MySpace setting to abstract subcultural identity, it will be shown that the interconnected and instantaneous nature of the modern communicative landscape negates the possibility of online subcultural groups in their traditional form.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all those who helped me along the way during this process. To Jackie, my friends, my family and those at Ryerson University and York University (Jo Ann and Professor Steve Bailey) - none of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for your inspiration, your patience, your love and your support.

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Introduction

From RL to Online, Subcultural Groups Gone Digital

Advancements in communication technologies within the last twenty years have furthered the present state of network culture, and have propelled aspects of real-world social interaction further into to the realm of the digital. Closely mirroring the cultural transition from the importance of the written object to the pictorial, the Internet has shared a similar developmental history. Originating as a solely text-based medium in its early conception, developments in Internet programming and computer technologies have furthered the technological ability to display static as well as moving images (animations), music, and video online. The gradual ascendancy of the Internet as an established, if not dominant, form of communication, coupled with advancements in what types of media are available for users to display on web pages, have created a proliferation of social-networking websites and a sharp rise in their popularity. The creation of online "sticky sites" [1], those that allow users to create and post personal pages including pictures, music, text, and video, have created an interactive network of participants that are able to search out other users with common thematic interests. MySpace.com[2], the largest of these

1 Robertson, Grant. "Old Media Makes Itself New." Globe and Mail 11 Mar. 2006, sec. B: 4.
2 MySpace. 2 Feb. 2006 <www.myspace.com>.

community sites boasts a monthly user traffic of 46.2 million visitors[3]. Having about 110 million users worldwide, MySpace.com is considered the most trafficked website in the United States, with the addition of nearly 300,000 new users per day.[4] Within the site, new users create then maintain personal profiles, and search for others to add to their on-line social network. These on-line friendships or links can be both personal friends from what Internet theorist Sherry Turkle identified in early on-line community studies as "RL" or "real life"[5], or can be strictly electronic acquaintances chosen because of shared interests.

In creating a MySpace profile, users are required to create personal pages which contain small textual sections describing personal details such as: date and place of birth, marital / relationship status, ethnicity, education level, occupation, personal income, and physical appearance. In addition to these personal details, users define standard personal interests such as favourite: television shows, books, music (groups / performers / genres of music), and movies. These interests within the networking page become HTML hyper-links, which allow a user to find others with the same interest. Should a user, for example, list The Sex Pistols as a band they are interested in, selecting the now hyper-linked band name will generate and return a list of other users who also have The Sex Pistols listed as a favourite music group. Subsequently, these

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3 Robertson, Grant. "Old Media Makes Itself New." Globe and Mail 11 Mar. 2006, sec. B: 4.
4 "MySpace Plans Redesign." Globe and Mail. 13 June 2008. Reuters. 13 June 2008 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20080613.wgtmyspace0613/EmailBNStory/Technology/home>.
5 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

users can be added as 'friends' and networks will begin to form around specified interests.

As well as individual identity formation, online groups can form within the MySpace setting. Carrying over from offline social groups, online groups often mimic their real-life counterparts and form around factors such as: city or country of residence, ethnicity, sexual orientation, personal interests, or political affiliation, to name a small portion. Included within these group classifications are those groups referred to as "subcultural", or "groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices."[6] While membership to a subcultural group has "typically been characterized by the consumption of specific types of music and clothing, and participation in local, face-to-face music scenes"[7], these online groups remove participation from Turkle's RL-realm and digitize both groups and group members.

Pending the user's personal interests, and how they define themselves in terms of a possible membership to larger social groups (Punk, Goth, Skinhead, etc.), images contained within the user profiles are often styled in conjunction with textual information that is placed on the page. Should a user, for example, define themselves as being part of the 'Punk' subculture, personal information listed such as musical interests / political affiliation will work in tandem with visual

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6 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 1.
7 Williams, J. Patrick. "Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography. 35.2 (2006): 173.

cues in the user images. The images presented within the user's page will reflect such interests, and will act on the page to denote group membership. Selecting this primary image to represent the user becomes key to the creation of a profile. This picture, or 'default image', will be displayed prominently on the default or main page of the user profile and serves image that will act as a visual representation of the user. The purpose of this image within the MySpace setting, is to act as a 'representation of self', and can be a number of image types. In this context, representation serves to describe the way in which the image selected by the user will act as visually constituted likeness of self; influenced, created, and selected because of the image's ability to summarize personal interests of the user in pictorial form. This 'representation of self' that is summarized in the default image of the user is not a hastily chosen image, but a carefully selected piece in the creation of an online identity. While some users choose to employ drawings, cartoons, or illustrations, most MySpace profiles contain a stylized photograph that act as a pictorial representation of self. Occupying such an important spot in the construction of an online identity, this selected representational image of self highlights the pictorial turn emphasized within this new social space.

The growing popularity of MySpace, and its shifting site of identity construction to that of an online/virtual setting adds yet another layer to the already broad spectrum of cultural / communication studies. No longer bound to

the textual inclusions found within the "MUDs" or "Multi-User Domains,"[8] of Turkle's work, the display capabilities of the modern Internet have significantly changed how we are able to represent ourselves online. In the creation of an online identity on MySpace, the self is abstracted into a series of textual and visual representations that are to be interpreted by other site users. This abstractive processes that will be shown, as was outlined by theorist Guy Debord,, enables the modern online subject to create a digital 'self' though a series of pictorial, textual, and multi-media (music, and video) based inclusions. In doing so, these inclusions become abstracted into 'spectacular' representations of self, where mere appearance becomes key.

Since its formal conception in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago in the mid nineteen-thirties[9], subcultural studies have long recognized the important intersection of socio-economic standing and its subsequent effect on developing aesthetic styles within group formation. Dictated in some cases by a lower class-standing with restricted access to money that would not allow group members the economic ability to purchase new clothing, other groups developed fashion / aesthetic trends within group membership for completely signatory purposes. The emergence of the Internet has abstracted these signatory practices into the online setting, and has created the ability for users and commercial companies to synthesize and appropriate subcultural

8 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 11.
9 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 19.

imagery within the constructs of modern communication. Rooted within the paradigm of Critical Theory, my investigation seeks to investigate the abstractive aesthetic and socio-economic processes present in online social networking sites such as MySpace.com. With the recent sale of MySpace to media conglomerate News Corp., for a staggering $580 million US[10], this corporate ownership of a now ubiquitous digital space necessitates an examination that will address issues of the image-based abstraction process and the new notions of commodity that go in tandem. In the creation of an online identity on MySpace, the self is abstracted into a series of textual and visual representations that are to be interpreted by other site users. The way in which MySpace abstracts identity points to the Internet's role in the commodification of information. Once commodified this information becomes vulnerable to the control of what author McKenzie Wark identifies as the emerging vectoralist class. Due to its nature as a network, which depends on its own constant self-maintenance, the rapid growth in MySpace accelerates the process of materiality being replaced by information. Having considered these new signatory processes, my study hopes to illustrate that the interconnected and instantaneous nature of the modern communicative landscape negates the possibility of online subcultural groups in their classical form.

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10 Robertson, Grant. "Old Media Makes Itself New." Globe and Mail 11 Mar. 2006, sec. B: 4.

Chapter One:

The Literature of Subcultural Studies and the Missing Digital

Subcultural studies have long combined the fields of sociology, semiotics, Critical theory, cultural studies, and more recently 'new media' or Internet studies. The introduction of digital communication technologies within the last twenty years, specifically the Internet, have changed classically held notions of subculture and have necessitated a re-examination of the term 'subcultural', as the possible detrimental impacts of such technologies have not been addressed in their modern form. Subculture, as referenced in this paper, is again defined as "groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it."[11] In the following brief overview of sociological then subcultural studies, as well as key texts within the field, I hope to illustrate an existing gap in the consideration of the contemporary iteration of the Internet, and its role in the possible negation of the subculture term.

Though formalized in the early parts of the twentieth century, the roots of subcultural studies can be traced to sixteenth-century England, and the work of author John Awdeley. In his work *The Fraternity of Vagabonds*, Awdeley identified what he saw as an emerging number of "vagabond types who

11 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 1.

frequented the edges of early modern English society." [12] Creating categories such as "the ruffler, the whip-jack, the palliard" and, "the swigman"[13], Awdeley's work began to classify and categorize groups on the margins of Elizabethan England. As noted by subcultural theorist Ken Gelder, the work of Awdeley and contemporaries like Thomas Harman (who identified categories of con-men: cutpurses, doxies, walking morts, discharged soldiers, apprentice actors, brothel keepers, etc.) sought to create "an elaborate schema of classification developed to give identification to a diversity of subcultural anti-heroes." [14] Creating these categories allowed those on the 'inside' of society to juxtapose their social standing, and sense was made of the seemingly disorderly groups by, "producing social groups that are also anti-social."[15] The publication of Gamini Salgado's *The Elizabethan Underworld*[16] in 1977 begins what Gelder identifies as "an influential genealogy of subcultural studies."[17] Originally printed in 1930 by A.V. Judges under the same title, Salgado examined a "hitherto submerged realm of social activity", and placed it, "in contrast to the prevailing conventions of an emergent modernity." [18] While some lauded the books attempt to examine marginal figures, and to "shed light on their 'dark' and subterranean habits, to

12 Ibid. 2.
13 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 2.
14 Ibid. 2.
15 Ibid. 2.
16 Salgado, Gamini. The Elizabethan Underworld. Totowa, N.J: Rowman & Littlefield, 1977.
17 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 2.
18 Ibid. 2.

comprehend their difference but also confirm or underwrite it"[19], others questioned Salgado's broad approach. In a review of the work in the *Journal of Social History*, reviewer J.S. Cockburn questions Salgado's usage of a "variety of literary and secondary sources", and calls the result "a book which is amorphous, impressionistic and, for most purposes, irrelevant.'"[20] Cockburn writes:

> Professor Salgado plunges into the "underworld" with scant regard for the definition of his topic. Social and legal historians have realized only too clearly the fundamental problems inherent in identifying 'crime' and in distinguishing those who *live* by crime and immorality from those engage in less damaging forms of deviance or indulge occasional peccadilloes. The former constitute "the underworld" (a precise but pejorative term); the latter, society at large.[21]

While the breadth of Salgado's categories could be seen as an "unrecognizable rag-bag" of characters and categories, including "astrologers, alchemists, the insane, witches, women, and the venereally diseased"[22], it was the juxtaposition of those categories against those "prevailing conventions of an emergent modernity" [23] that Salgado wished to examine. Contrasting subcultures to those of the emerging trends in society, we can see the important beginnings of an

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19 Ibid. 2.
20 Cockburn, J,S. "Reviewed Work(S): the Elizabethan Underworld by Gamini Salgado." Journal of Social History 11.4 (1978): 594.
21 Ibid. 594.
22 Ibid. 594.
23 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 2.

examination surrounding "subcultural relations to property and labour."[24] This would mark a turning point in the examination of subcultures, where subcultural groups were viewed in terms of an emerging capitalist system. This idea was furthered by theorist Craig Dionne, when he examined how subcultures were seen historically "as essentially unproductive- as well as itinerant, moving *across* property rather than settled within its orderly confines." [25] Here, Dionne cities the work of Awdeley, Harman , and William Harrison in his work *Description of England* from 1587, pointing out how these transient figures interrupted the structured confines of the newly emerging capitalist system. In doing so, Dionne highlights how "stability finds its opposite in those migrant vagabonds"[26] and the creation of the subcultural figure in terms of socio-economic standing is born.

It would be this 'vagabond' figure that would play a key role within the studies of the burgeoning field of sociology, and at the forefront of this fieldwork was the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. Established when the school opened in 1892, the period of the early Twentieth Century to the mid 1930s saw the University of Chicago come to heavily influence both sociological theory and practice across the United States. Within the Chicago School, sociology meant "urban sociology: the study of constituent groups or social 'types' in the city."[27] Influential faculty such as Robert E. Park would create key

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24 Ibid. 2.
25 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 3.
26 Ibid. 2.
27 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part one." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 19.

sociological texts that would go on to heavily influence subcultural studies. It would be here that "subcultural studies formally begins, in empirical urban fieldwork that recognized the socializing imperatives of people even as it finds itself drawn to the marginal or 'unassimilated' social types."[28] In his examination of the city, Park saw pockets of people created by what he called 'industrial organization'. Moving away from what he considered "the older social and economic organization of society, which was based on family ties, local associates, on culture, caste, and status", the contemporary city had an organization, "based on occupation and vocational interests."[29] Here, people are brought together now by the types of jobs they carried out and a "social solidarity" is created, based "not on sentiment and habit, but on community of interests."[30] While collectives of like-minded residents began to group together, the city was not without its "divergent types".[31] Organized into "moral regions", the city develops, "these detached milieus in which vagrant and suppressed impulses, passions, and ideals emancipate themselves from the dominant moral order."[32] It is here in these dark corners of the city that subcultural studies found their subjects of study, and the 'deviant' figure on the outskirts of society continued to be the focal point of interest.

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28 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part one." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 19.
29 Park, Robert E. "The City." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 28.
30 Ibid. 29.
31 Ibid. 32.
32 Ibid. 33.

With the term 'sub-culture' being used by the 1940s to "account for particular kinds of social difference in an increasingly pluralized and fractured United States"[33], theorists like Mliton M. Gordon and Albert K. Cohen began to shift subcultural studies away from the solitary focus of the 'deviant figure.' It would be Gordon, in his work *The Concept of a Sub-Culture and its Application* who wished to open the concept of sub-culture to:

> refer to a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual. [34]

In this conception, 'sub-cultures' were no longer necessarily working in opposition of an established norm. Here, so called 'sub-cultural groups' could be formed around reputable things, and the term moved further from its criminal roots in the Edwardian conception. With this shift, the term deviance could now be stretched to apply to, "the person who does not conform to the subculture."

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33 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part one." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 21.
34 Gordon, Milton M.. "The City." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 46.

Subcultural studies came to an academic forefront at the CCCS, or Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in1964.[35] Building on three foundational texts that would go on to form the basis of cultural studies, CCCS members would turn to everyday cultural items such as: popular media, popular culture, music, and literature to examine everyday sociological interaction. The work of Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*[36], E.P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*[37], and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*[38] , first moved subcultural studies away from traditional participant observation to the examination of the everyday popular culture items. In considering these items, the analyses "read these things ideologically, since culture here is always taken as a matter of (class) conflict."[39] Heavily based in UK class politics, the CCCS' work focused on telling a "history from below"[40], as the British working class held a form of subcultural identity of their own. In his work, *Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community*[41] CCCS author Phil Cohen identified the 'latent function' of a subcultural, as it strived to:

> express and resolve, albeit 'magically', the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture. The succession

35 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part two." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 81.
36 Williams, Raymond. Culture and Society. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963.
37 Thompson, E.P. The Making of the English Working Class. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980.
38 Hoggart, Richard. The Uses of Literacy. London: Chatto & Windus, 1957.
39 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part two." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 81
40 Ibid. 82.
41 Cohen, Phil. "Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community." Working Papers in Cultural Studies. Birmingham: University of Birmingham: CCCS, 1972.

> of subcultures which this parent culture generated can thus all be considered so many variations on a central theme- the contradiction, at an ideological level, between working-class Puritanism and the new hedonism of consumption; at an economic level, between a future as part of the socially mobile elite or part of the new lumpen proletariat.[42]

Defined by Karl Marx in his work *The Eighteenth Brumiere of Louis Bonaparte*, the 'lumpen proletariat (or *lumpenproletariat)*, were the refuse of society. Much like the figures from John Awdeley's work (beggars, prostitutes, racketeers, swindlers, petty criminals), these were the lowest outcasts from society. Cast aside from 'moral society', members of the *lumpenproletariat* now made up a large section of industrial centers.[43] Regretfully, as they had no consciousness of a class system, the *lumpenproletariat* had no revolutionary potential. Cohen's work would go on to influence many within the CCCS, and its assertion "that all subcultures must always be working class"[44] would have a lasting effect on the Critical stance that many subsequent authors would take.

Furthering his class examination of subcultures, Cohen also considered the geographical location of group member's residences. For Cohen, subcultural group identity – skinheads, mods, goths, rockers, punks- is "expressed

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42 Cohen, Phil. "Subcultural Conflict." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 89.
43 Marx, Karl. The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Trans. D D. L. New York: Mondial, 2005.
44 Ibid. 82.

territorially first and foremost."[45] In working-class sections of East-End London (Hoxton, Mile End, Whitechapel, etc.), not only did subcultures develop, causing conflict when they interacted, but sub-communities developed within already subdivided geographical areas. While members of various groups would still be part of a larger group, 'East-Enders' for example, conflict would still arise from those 'East-Enders' living in Hoxton, as opposed to Mile End. Here we see the interesting addition of physical geography to the already intricate interplay of class-based examinations.

Published in 1975, Stuart Hall (who had become the CCCS director in 1968) edited a collection of essays entitled *Resistance Through Ritual: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*[46] which are based in Marxian notions of class by drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci. Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony taken from his work *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*[47], Hall wished to illustrate how British ruling classes won social, ideological, and cultural subordination from working class people through regulation and coercion. There was hope for resistance according to Hall, and it would be possible for a subordinated group to "win space back in return."[48]

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45 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part two." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 82.
46 Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson, eds. Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain. London: Routledge, 1975.
47 Gramsci, Antonio. Selections From the Prison Notebooks. New York: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
48 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part two." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 83.

It would be personal clothing style that would act as a weapon of choice to combat hegemonic forces, and for Hall and other contemporary members of the CCCS, the focus of study when looking at subcultures turned from territory to style. Working in a time where "new emerging consumer markets [were] designed to make youth a distinctive category", Hall sought to examine the, "way subcultures purchase and organize their 'look' and 'outlook' through fashion and related tastes and practices."[49] This would be a turning point for the CCCS, as the study of semiotics would come to heavily influence their work. Drawing heavily on semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes, and his work *Mythologies*[50], members of the CCCS now looked to examine signs and the process of signification in subcultural style. Signs, as they are best described, "take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning."[51] The process of signification then takes place when the sign is taken to stand for something other than what it is. In the case of subcultural clothing style, a particular aspect of style (spike hair, piercing, dark clothing, etc.) empowers everyday objects by taking their usage out of regular every-day contexts, giving them a deeper subcultural significance. Theorist Angela McRobbie was one of the first CCCS members to examine how fashion could situate one against popular and commercial culture by defying upper-class

49 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part two." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 83.
50 Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. New York: Paladin, 1972.
51 Chandler, Daniel. Semiotics. London: Routledge, 2002. 17.

notions of style. In her 1975 work *Girls and Subcultures: An Exploration*[52], McRobbie along with co-author Jenny Garber illustrated how subcultural group members, particularly women, could resist hegemonic consumer trends through alternative styles of dress. The seminal work in this examination of subcultural style would be Dick Hebdige's influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*[53]. Illustrating the subversive capacities of style and objects, Hebdige begins his work by telling the story of gay French writer Jean Genet who was imprisoned on charges of homosexuality when caught with a jar of Vaseline. Here a mere everyday object, a toiletry product, becomes significant and subversive through its association with homosexual sex. Hebdige draws heavily on semiotic theory developed by Barthes, and proposes that subcultural style empowers everyday objects by taking their usage out of regular every-day contexts which give them a deeper subcultural significance.

The field of subcultural studies would remain virtually unchanged until the later part of the twentieth century. Growing out of a post-modern critique of the somewhat dated work of the CCCS, the mid-1990s saw the development of what was termed 'Post-Subcultural Studies'. First mentioned by author Ian Chambers, in his 1987 work *Maps for the Metropolis: A Possible Guide to the Present*[54] to

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52 McRobbie, Angela, and Jenny Garber. "Girls and Subcultures: an Exploration." Resistance Through Rituals. Ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. London: Routledge, 1975.
53 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Metheun, 1979.
54 Chambers, Ian. "Maps for the Metropolis: a Possible Guide to the Present." Cultural Studies 1. 1 (1987): 1-21.

refer to musical eclecticism, the development of post-subcultural studies as a formal discipline is a more recent phenomenon. Held in Vienna in May of 2001, the symposium titled "Post-Subcultural Studies: New Post-Subcultural Formations within Popular Culture and their Political Impact"[55], clearly marked the formal beginnings of the field. Adopting what they considered to be a post-CCCS position, the work of a 'post-subculturist' sought to "mark out and assess subsequent developments" in the subcultural field. By moving away from the CCCS's methods and areas of focus, post-subcultural studies looked to modernize the consideration of subcultures. In reflecting on the work of the CCCS, post-subcultural authors such as Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton note,

> ...the era seems long gone of working-class youth subcultures 'heroically' resisting subordination through 'semiotic guerrilla warfare'. Both youth cultural activities and the research efforts in this field seem nowadays to reflect a more pragmatic approach comparer to the romanticism of the CCCS, whose authors saw radical potential in largely symbolic challenges.[56]

Once firmly rooted in a Gramscian-semiotic approach, the work of this new post-subcultural field looked to update the CCCS, and to find a new way to think about subculture. Some post-subculturists, like author Geoff Stahl, have gone so far as

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55 Muggleton, David, and Rupert Weinzierl. "What is 'Post-Subcultural Studies'?" The Post-Subcultures Reader. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 3.
56 Ibid. 5.

to suggest the rejection of the very term 'subculture'. In his work *Tastefully Renovating Subcultural Theory: Making Space for a New Model*[57] , Stahl rejects what he calls "a linear model, such as class acting as the sole determinant in the origins of subcultural practice."[58] Borrowing from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's model of 'fields' in his work *The Field of Cultural Production*[59], post-subcultural authors like Stahl began to introduce a more fluid interplay into the consideration of how post-subcultures form and operate. In opposition to a limited class-based examination, Bourdieu imagined society as a field, where people interact and struggle to find resources. Embracing this non-linear idea, post-subcultural studies recognized "the activities occurring within and between fields that are interrelated in more complex, mobile, non-linear, and multi-dimensional ways than previously theorized."[60] Shifting the focus of study, the ideas of multiplicity and fluidity closely associated with Postmodernism were now central to post-subcultural studies. In a rapidly changing field of study, Weinzierl and Muggleton noted, "the whole research agenda in this area has clearly shifted, heralding the emergence of new methodological, theoretical, and substantive concerns."[61]

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57 Stahl, Geoff. "Tastefully Renovating Subcultural Theory: Making Space for a New Model." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 27-40.
58 Ibid. 33.
59 Bourdieu, Pierre. The Field of Cultural Production. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
60 Stahl, Geoff. "Tastefully Renovating Subcultural Theory: Making Space for a New Model." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 33.
61 Muggleton, David, and Rupert Weinzierl. "What is 'Post-Subcultural Studies'?" The Post-Subcultures Reader. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 3.

Within the updated concerns of post-subcultural studies, the role of the Computer-Mediated Communication systems, or CMCs, began to be considered. New developments in communication technologies, such as the Internet opened communicative possibilities, and brought people closer than ever before. With ground-breaking work being done in the relatively young field of 'new media' or Internet studies, the potential impacts of technology and the changing notions of personal identity were being raised. Key to this bourgeoning area of study was Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*[62]. Written in 1995, Turkle was one of the first theorists to examine how technology, specifically new on-line technologies such as the Internet, affected interpersonal interaction. Embracing, "a postmodern aesthetic of complexity and decentring", Turkle conducted an on-line ethnographic study by examining the interaction of people in on-line "MUDs" or "Multi-User Domains."[63] These MUDs were early text based communities / spaces, where participants were limited to "enter textual descriptions of imaginary places that others [could] visit and of objects."[64] Turkle proposed that CMCs allow users to see personal identity as multiple rather than being singular, as online identities are external abstracted representations formed by the user.

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62 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
63 Ibid. 11.
64 Mitchell, William J. "Replacing Place." The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media. Ed. Peter Lunenfeld. Cambridge: MIT P, 2001. 114.

Following Turkle's work, fields such as subcultural studies began to look at subcultural identity online, and the role played by on-line communications in the facilitation of subcultures. In their initial stages, much of this on-line communication was done through so-called 'Usenet forums', and e-mail lists. Developed from the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) technology that would go on to found the basis of the modern Internet, Usenet network was initially used by participants, "making space on their [computer] hard disks to record news and transmitting it by telephone."[65] A form of "asynchronous media", Usenet newsgroups can be defined as, "publicly accessible discussion forums organized by topic which similar in form to email do not require e-mail subscriptions." [66] By receiving text-based messages from other users on various issues that became known as 'threads', users created forums dedicated to a wide array of larger interests / groups. One of the first such Usenet forums dedicated to the gothic subculture was *alt.gothic*, formed in the United States in the early 1990s.[67] Identifying these Usenet forums and e-mail lists as "the most significant aspect of the internet for most goths and, therefore, the construction of the goth scene as a whole", theorist Paul Hodkinson in his work *Communicating Goth,* rejected the World Wide Web as a whole because of its lack of specificity

65 Flichy, Patrice. "New Media History." The Handbook of New Media. Ed. Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone. London: Sage, 2006. 190.
66 Baym, Nancy K, "Interpersonal Life Online." The Handbook of New Media. Ed. Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone. London: Sage, 2006. 35.
67 Hodkinson, Paul. "Communicating Goth." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 567.

to the gothic subculture. Concerned with the ease in which non-members of the subculture could easily access community sites, some worried,

> groupings such as the goth scene would have their distinctiveness, commitment, identity and autonomy thoroughly dissolved by the ability of individuals to move from one virtual affiliation to another on a mouse-click.[68]

While some viewed on-line activity as a detraction from physical community, Hodkinson looked at the usage of these Usenet forums within the gothic subculture to "concentrate their involvement with the goth scene", which would in turn, "reinforce the boundaries of the grouping."[69]

Also adopting the Usenet technologies were on-line 'Fan Cultures', or those communities dedicated to the discussion about particular forms of entertainment (movies, television, music) and their performers. In her 2002 work *'The X-Files', Online Fan Culture, and the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigades*, post-subcultural theorist Rhiannon Bury examined notions of gender within the Usenet group *alt.tv.x-files*. Dedicated to the Fox television show, the *alt.tv.x-files* Usenet group was formed in the fall of 1993 with the premiere of the show and quickly spawned a sub-group dedicated to the discussion of leading actor David Duchovny.[70] Dubbed the 'David Duchovny Estrogen Brigades', or DDEBs for

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68 Hodkinson, Paul. "Communicating Goth." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 565.
69 Ibid. 565.
70 Bury, Rhiannon. "'The X-Files', Online Fan Culture, and the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigades" The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 269.

short, the group was founded to allow for a discussion of Duchovny between female participants in order to avoid a male dismissal of the subject as merely "drool, connoting a dirty and infantile act."[71] Deviating from what Bury saw as the, "unmarked masculinist norms of online fan culture in the mid-1990s", the ability to create a forum dedicated specifically to the interest of the DDEBs was a great benefit to the Usenet technology.

Updating the usage of on-line forums by subcultural groups, author J. Patrick Williams, looked to a Usenet-styled discussion forum in his 2006 work *Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet.*[72] Developed in the mid 1980s around Washington, D.C., 'straightedge' subculture revolves around shared sets of practices. Key to these practices are the rejection of: tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and promiscuous sex, and so called 'straightedgers' develop, "personal identities grounded in an ascetic lifestyle." [73] Conducting an analysis of a straightedge site that used, "an asynchronous bulletin board service, wherein individuals posted messages in forums that anyone with an internet connection and a web browser could access"[74], Williams identified two emerging 'types' of on-line subcultural users. Differentiating between those who participated in 'real life' subcultural scenes, and those who didn't, Williams identified group members who, "used the form as a *supplement*

71 Bury, Rhiannon. "'The X-Files', Online Fan Culture, and the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigades" The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 272.
72 Williams, J, Patrick. "Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 35:2 (2006): 173-200.
73 Ibid. 176.
74 Ibid. 180.

to participation in a face-to-face music scene and those whose internet use was a *primary* or *sole* source of subcultural participation"[75]

While the issues raised by the aforementioned subcultural and post-subcultural works (group identity, notions of authenticity, subcultural group participation, etc.) are certainly still of interest to the field of subcultural studies at large, it is the outdated on-line technologies which have been used as the basis of study that needed to be updated. As shown, the primary source of study for subcultural studies online has been to analyze posts to Usenet groups formed around particular subcultural groups. While this Usenet / news group technology would have been one of the primary modes of discussion in the days of early internet use, or Web 1.0, I would suggest that the Usenet model of examination is now dated with modern developments in Internet technologies. Citing technological limitations such as: wasted bandwidth, the requirement for large amounts of disk-space, and an inundation of thousands of groups- most of which were filled with irrelevant information (spam), the 'death' or planned obsolescence of Usenet groups have long been called for. In his 1996 article 'Death to Newsgroups', appearing in *Wired* magazine, writer Andrew C. Bulhak suggested the following:

> Get rid of newsgroups. Articles can be kept in one large pool and called up with word searches. To post an article, just throw it into

75 Williams, J, Patrick. "Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 35:2 (2006):175.

> the ocean - the reader's software will fish it out. If you desire a specialty forum, you can create a virtual newsgroup by naming it, as with IRC channels; it will last as long as people use it. Since all posts are kept in one pool, spamming is eliminated.[76]

While the death of Usenet has been decreed (somewhat incorrectly) multiple times subsequent to Bulhak's, it should be recognized that the weaning usage of such 'first generation' technologies, such as discussion groups, necessitates an updated examination of how subcultural groups now interact on-line. With the purchase of the Usenet archives in February of 2001 by Internet giant Google, from previous owners Deja.com, the move away from such modes of on-line discussion had long begun. Containing 700 million messages dating back to 1981[77], I would suggest the function of the Usenet repository now serves an archival purpose rather than being a primary mode of communication by the contemporary user. With the most recent blow to the Usenet system coming from New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, the newsgroup model of communication seems all but finished. Citing concerns over un-regulated groups and their ties to child pornography, Cuomo has convinced three of the largest communications companies both in New York and nation-wide: Time Warner, Sprint, and Verizon, to drastically limit (if not eliminate) Usenet access. According to their agreement,

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76 Bulhak, Andrew C. "Death to Newsgroups." Wired June 1996.
77 Fleishman, Glenn. "Internet: Usenet Archive is Posted on Web." New York Times 12 Dec. 2001, sec. Technology.

> Time Warner Cable said it will cease to offer customers access to any Usenet newsgroups, a decision that will affect customers nationwide. Sprint said it would no longer offer any of the tens of thousands of alt.* Usenet newsgroups. Verizon's plan is to eliminate some "fairly broad newsgroup areas." [78]

With other Internet Service Providers (ISPs) expected to follow due to concerns over access to child pornography, the move away from the Usenet model seems to be all but solidified.

Recent developments aside, the Usenet model of communication falls outside of the newly developing trend in Internet development, dubbed 'Web 2.0'. Though somewhat ambiguous in its definition, the idea of 'Web 2.0' is distinguished as, " a new generation of participatory sites like MySpace.com and YouTube.com, which emphasize user-generated content, social networking and interactive sharing."[79] Based in the construction of linked participants, like that of MySpace.com, the architecture of 'Web 2.0' is:

> based on social software where users generate content, rather than simply consume it, and on open programming interfaces that let developers add to a web service or get at data. It is an arena where the web rather than the desktop is the dominant platform, and organization appears spontaneously through the actions of the

78 McCullagh, Declan. "N.Y. Attorney General Forces ISPs to Curb Usenet Access." CNET News 10 June 2008. 10 June 2008 <http://news.cnet.com/8301-13578_3-9964895-38.html>.
79 Kakutani, Michiko. "Books of the Times: the Cult of the Amateur." New York Times 29 June 2007, sec. Books.

group, for example, in the creation of folksonomies created through tagging.

The creation of such user-generated social networking sites has created a distinct generational shift in how we communicate with one another on-line. In a 2007 telephone survey conducted by The Pew Internet Project, more than half (55 percent) of the 935 American youths, aged 12-17, used an on-line social networking site to stay in contact with friends. In terms of site usage, MySpace.com dominated this usage with 85 percent of those polled citing they updated their MySpace profiles most often.[80]

While it can be argued that the interaction of those on a Usenet / newsgroup system could constitute 'social networking' in a similar sense to the current conception, there exist clear differences in the technological capabilities and wide usage of sites like MySpace.com. While the work of theorists, such as Bury and Hodkinson, has addressed the introduction of new digital communicative technologies into the landscape of subcultural and post-subcultural studies, there is an existing gap in subcultural theory with regards to modern social networking sites. Currently situated within the Usenet model of internet communication, subcultural studies must update its field of study to consider recent developments in how we connect on-line. As notions of

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80 Lenhart, Amanda, and Mary Madden. "Reports- Family, Friends & Community - Social Networking Websites and Teens: an Overview." Pew Internet & American Life Project. 1 July 2007. Pew Research Center. 14 Nov. 2007 <http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/198/report_display.asp>.

subcultural style are changing with the abstraction and commodification of on-line information posted to these social networking sites, a fresh examination of these important sites of identity formation is necessary. As I will illustrate in the subsequent chapters, the fluid nature of online identity and the growing concern over corporate ownership of online social spaces necessitate the consideration of the possible detrimental impacts of such technologies might incur.

Chapter Two:

The Changing Meaning of Subcultural Style

As noted in the previous chapter, subcultural studies have long recognized the importance of aesthetic style, and its role in the formation of personal and group identity. In the historical studies of so called 'fringe' groups, researchers noted that individual group members not only shared socio-economic similarities, but distinct aesthetic / stylistic commonalities, as well. Dictated in some cases by a lower class-standing, which restricted access to money for new clothing, other subcultural groups developed aesthetic trends within group membership for signatory purposes. Recognizing the way which fashion, "provides perhaps the most immediately recognizable example of subcultural style"[81], theorists have long considered how and why subcultures seek to develop a particular 'look'. While an interest in how fashion speaks to larger issues in a particular period of time is not new, subcultural studies looked to incorporate notions of class into the consideration of style. Abandoning the idea that subcultural groups resisted culture at large through clothing style alone, post-subcultural studies have updated considerations of style to include notions of pre-existing personal tastes and Sarah Thorton's idea of 'subcultural capital'.[82] Furthering this update to the consideration of subcultural style, I wish to introduce

81 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 271

82 Thorton, Sarah. Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital. Cambridge: Polity/Wesleyan UP, 1995.

the creation of a new type of hybridized 'digital style' within on-line social networking sites. A combination of pictorial and textual inclusions, this 'digital style' is a progression of aesthetic subcultural style, as studied by CCCS member Dick Hebdige, and updates the term 'style' to include the now popular visual aesthetic of online social networking sites like MySpace.com.

Published in 1904, Georg Simmel's essay 'Fashion' was one of the first sociological works to look at the larger symbolic role of clothing in terms of societal classes. By examining "what seemed to be a proliferation of different clothing styles at the time as symptomatic of the increasing pace of modern consumer capitalism", Simmel examined how clothing could create, "an immediately registered manifestation of contemporary life."[83] Inhabiting a space of differentiation and inclusion, Simmel's examination of fashion looked to explain how people used styles of dress to both belong to, and rebel against, a larger society. By looking at fashion from the view of the upper classes, clothing became

> a means of preserving their own difference from 'those standing in a lower position'. When the later begin to appropriate their fashion styles and thus transgress established class divisions, the upper

83 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 271

classes adopt new styles in order to reaffirm their distinctive social identity.[84]

It would be this class-based cycle of innovation and appropriation that would become central to the study of fashion within subcultural studies. By modifying subsequent studies to shift the perspective of study from those of the 'upper' class, to those of the 'lower' class, a so-called "perspective from below"[85] would begin to emerge.

In their 1956 work *Zoot-Suiters and Mexicans: Symbols in Crowd Behaviour*[86], authors Ralph H. Turner and Samuel J. Surace examined the symbolism of the 'zoot-suit' during the so called Los Angeles 'zoot-suit riots" in 1943. Defined by, "long suit coats and trousers extremely pegged at the cuff, draped full around the knees, and termination in deep pleats at the waist"[87], so called 'zoot-suits' became symbols of an act of "conspicuous consumption" by the owners. War-time rationing regulations surrounding the amount of materials (food, fabric, etc.) that were to be used domestically made the large suits, which required great amounts of fabric to produce, supposed symbols of a political defiance. Though the suits were created within the dance-hall culture of young African American men, the term 'zooters' became synonymous with the Hispanic

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84 Ibid. 272.
85 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 272
86 Ralph, Turner H., and Samuel J. Surace. "Zoot-Suiters and Mexicans: Symbols in Crowd Behaviour." The American Journal of Sociology 57:1 (1956).
87 Turner, Ralph H., and Samuel J. Surace. "Zoot-Suiters and Mexicans: Symbols in Crowd Behaviour." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 278.

youth that popularized the 'zoot-suit' look. Beginning on June 3, 1943, the 'zoot-suit' riots were, "sporadic acts of violence involving principally United States naval personnel, with the support of a sympathetic Anglo community, in opposition to members of the Mexican community."[88] Seen as an act of un-patriotic defiance during the war-time effort of the U.S., Turner and Surace examined how 'zooters' became political symbols, with the connotation of such a symbol (viewed as un-patriotic) eliciting particular types of responses. In this case, such a 'response' would see African American and Mexican Americans caught wearing such suits to be stripped and beaten publically by large groups of Anglo-Americans. According to Turner and Surace,

> Zooters discovered on city streets were assaulted and forced to disrobe amid the jibes and molestations of the crowd. Street-cars and buses were stopped and searched, and zooters found therein were carried off into the streets and beaten. Cavalcades of hired taxicabs willed with sailors ranged the East Side districts of Los Angeles seeking, finding, and attacking zooters.[89]

By conducting a content analysis of newspaper coverage surrounding the riots, Turner and Surace identified how the term 'zoot suiter' replaced the politically ambiguous and generalized term 'Mexican' that was previously used to refer to so called 'zooters'. In is within this symbolic shift, that Turner and Surace

88 Turner, Ralph H., and Samuel J. Surace. "Zoot-Suiters and Mexicans: Symbols in Crowd Behaviour." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 278.
89 Ibid. 278.

the potential for a symbol to evoke hostility, and in the examination of events from the perspective of the African American and Mexican American communities an 'under-class perspective' emerges.

With subsequent studies focusing on those subcultures associated with lower or middle class standing, theorists looked to examine how groups in lower class standing appropriated so called 'upper class' fashions for their own signatory purposes. As profiled by journalist T.R. Fyvel in his 1963 work *Insecure Offenders: Rebellious Youth in the Welfare State (Revised Edition)*[90], the 'Teddy-boy' movement which developed in 1950s England was a good example of such class-based appropriation. Initially appropriated by 'dandys', or middle-classed men who looked to emulate the aristocratic style of the upper-classes, Edwardian fashion defined itself through, "curled bowlers worn over long hair, long Edwardian coats, [and] ultra-tight trousers."[91] While 'dandys' looked to appear aristocratic through their lavish fashion and pursuit of leisure, they rarely came from well-off backgrounds or held lucrative jobs to afford such lifestyles. In doing so, they created a middle-class reproduction of a high-class lifestyle. Seen as a "symptom of proletarian rebellion, a piece of defiant flat-flying"[92], it would be this appropriation of high-class style first accomplished by the 'dandys' that the Teddy-boys would later emulate. Made of members who, according to Fyvel

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90 Fyvel, T R. Insecure Offenders: Rebellious Youth in the Welfare State (Revised Edition). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963.
91 Ibid. 284.
92 Fyvel, T R. "Fashion and Revolt." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 284.

were, "almost entirely unskilled workers or just drifters", the now spectacular Edwardian fashions of the Teddy-boys made for a strange sight in 1960s working-class England. The desire for such theatrical outfits, which could cost upwards of £20 – a large sum for the time, marked how for the first time "English working-class youths had in their great majority become meticulous about their persons and highly fashion-conscious."[93] This shifting interest in fashion and its appropriation by the working-class majority would go on to greatly affect the rigid English class system, and would mark a renewed interest in the symbolic power of fashion within British cultural theory.

It would be Dick Hebdige, an influential member of the CCCS, who would bring the study of subcultural fashion to an academic forefront in 1979 with the publication of *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Interested in the "expressive forms and rituals of [those] subordinate groups"[94], Hebdige's study turned to everyday objects to 'speak' about their owners. Intrigued by, "the most mundane objects – a safety pin, a pointed show, a motor cycle", Hebdige looked to how every day items could "take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile." [95] Drawing on a broader conception of the term culture, as developed in Raymond Williams' 1965 work *The Long*

93 Fyvel, T R. "Fashion and Revolt." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 287.
94 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Metheun, 1979. 2.
95 Ibid. 2.

Revolution[96], Hebdige looked to examine the larger relationship between 'culture' and society. In his work, Williams had identified two basic definitions of culture, the first being a 'classical and conservative' take on culture that described "a standard of aesthetic excellence"[97] in fields of the arts, such as: opera, ballet, drama, and literature. The second conception of 'culture' Williams identified was an anthropological take on the concept, which contained a much broader range of consideration. In this conception, 'culture' referred to the meanings and values "not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour." [98] As the theory of culture now considered a whole way of life, Williams proposed,

> An altogether broader formulation of the relationships between culture and society, one which through the analysis of 'particular meanings and values' sought to uncover the concealed fundamentals of history; the 'general causes' and broad social 'trends' which lie behind the manifest appearances of an 'everyday life'. [99]

It would be this study of the 'everyday life' that Hebdige would adopt, and though the incorporation of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, Hebdige would see common stylistic items begin to explain the hidden workings of life around him. In his work, Barthes continued the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who pioneered the study of semiotics as "a science which studies the role of

96 Williams, Raymond. The Long Revolution,. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
97 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Metheun, 1979. 6.
98 Williams, Raymond. The Long Revolution,. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
99 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Metheun, 1979. 2.

signs as part of social life."[100] In his progression of de Saussure' semiotic model of study, Barthes "sought to expose the *arbitrary* nature of cultural phenomena, to uncover the latent meanings of an everyday life which, to all intents and purposes, was 'perfectly natural'."[101] By moving the conception and semiotic 'reading' of culture "beyond the library, the opera-house and the theatre", Barthes' notion of culture would broaden the spectrum of semiotic consideration to the "whole of everyday life."[102]

Within the subcultural context, it would be those items or objects "borrowed from the most sordid of contexts"[103] that would interest Hebdige in the consideration of a subcultural style. The development of punk subculture in the King's Road area of London in 1976 marked the generation of a new style, which grew out of the combination of "elements drawn from a while range of heterogeneous youth styles."[104] Being made up of: the narcissism, nihilism, and gender confusion of Glam rock, the minimalist aesthetic of American punk rock (ie- the Ramones), and the fervent dancing of Northern Soul, British punk combined a number of seemingly incompatible musical and visual styles together under what Hebdige described as a "cacophony on the visual level."[105] Tracing the roots of punk through the progression of 'beat', 'hipster', and Teddy-boy style,

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100 Chandler, Daniel. Semiotics. London: Routledge, 2002. 17.
101 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Metheun, 1979. 9.
102 Ibid. 9.
103 Ibid. 107.
104 Ibid. 25.
105 Ibid. 26.

Hebdige looked to describe punk's cacophonous style as a "distorted reflection[s] of all the major post-war subcultures."[106]

With past examinations of subcultural style attributing "an inordinate significance to the opposition between young and old, child and parent"[107], Hebdige wished to explain why such stylistic manifestations should occur at particular times. Adding a "historical specificity" to his examination, Hebdige focused on the era of post World War II Britain as the source of punk's development. Growing out of disillusionment with the ruling Labour and Conservative political parties post-WWII, punk formed around a youth culture that rejected the outdated notion of the British class system. Despite assurances that Britons could expect a "new age of unlimited affluence and equal opportunity", class, according to Hebdige, "refused to disappear." [108] While the British class-system remained in tact following the war, Hebdige identified the way in which "class was *lived*"[109], would greatly change. Citing the, "advent of the mass media, changes in the constitution of the family, in the organization of school and work, shifts in the relative status of work and leisure", Hebdige identified how such cultural developments "served to fragment and polarize the working-class community, producing a series of marginal discourses within the broad confines of class experience."[110] Growing out of these 'marginal discourses', the fashion

106 Ibid. 26.
107 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 73.
108 Ibid. 74.
109 Ibid. 74.
110 Ibid. 74.

developed by subsequent subcultural groups served to act as mechanism "of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation."[111] Echoing the research of Stuart Hall in *Resistance Through Rituals*, Hebdige saw the progression of subcultural youth styles as, "symbolic forms of resistance; as spectacular symptoms of a wider and more generally submerged decent which characterized the whole post-war period."[112] While to the outside eye, the cacophonic make-up punk fashions would have seemed a discordant mess, the 'function' of such a style was, according to Hebdige, actually quite calculated. It would be in the,

> chaos of quiffs, and leather jackets, brother creeps and winkle pickers, plimsolls and paka macs, moddy crops and skinhead strides, drainpipes and vivid socks, bum freezers and bovver boots[113]

, that punk would find its ability to 'speak' without using words. All of these stylistic 'things' punk employed within its visual arsenal were, "all kept 'in place' and 'out of time' by the spectacular adhesives: the safety pins and plastic clothes pegs, the bondage straps and bits of string."[114] Drawing on a type of 'revolting style', where safety pins "were taken out of their domestic 'utility' context and [were] worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lip", punk sought

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111 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 90
112 Ibid. 80
113 Ibid. 26.
114 Ibid. 74.

to shock those around it into question conceptions such as self-image and beauty.

As was noted in the previous chapter, by moving away from the CCCS's methods and areas of focus, post-subcultural studies looked to modernize the consideration of subculture. As the, "torn clothes and bondage pants, pierced skin and leather clothing continue to be ubiquitous symbols of punk in the popular imagination,"[115] post-subcultural studies began to look outside fashion to find sources of subcultural signification. Moving away from a solely semiotic consideration of subcultural clothing style, post-subcultural theorists have returned "to the kind of empirical sociology – and ethnography ... practised by Chicago School researchers."[116] By rejecting what Ken Gelder calls the "desk-bound, theoretical approaches" of the CCCS, post-subcultural researchers moved to study subcultural participants out in the field.

In Michael Atkinson's 2004 work *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*[117], we see the study of a subcultural group not from the eyes of a theorist far removed from the community, but from a member on the 'inside'. As a heavily tattooed man himself, Atkinson's work looked to examine the social / socializing

115 Bloustien, David. "'Oh Bondage, Up Yours!' or Here's Three Chords, Now for a Band: Punk Masochism, Skin, Anaclisis, Defacement." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003.
116 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 274.
117 Atkinson, Michael. Tattooed: the Sociogenesis of a Body Art. Toronto: University of Toronto P, 2003.

aspect that is created amongst so-called "tattoo enthusiasts"[118] through the process of tattooing. As existing American literature on the subject of tattooing, "tends to depict the collective of enthusiasts as an esoteric sub-group of intimate actors,"[119] Atkinson posits that the community is actually one of interdependence. By studying how 'enthusiasts' interact with other tattooed members of the community in the initial stages of the tattooing process, Atkinson illustrates how group members, "venture down a series of common interactive pathways that go beyond the simple application technique."[120] A tattooing community is created where members are encouraged to talk to others who have gone through the same process. As members continue to participate within the community, accumulating more tattoos along the way, they both "extend their range of their sociality" by becoming more engrained in the tattoo culture, but also further isolate themselves from culture at large. As Atkinson notes heavy tattooing is still seen as non-normative, some members choose to place tattoos in strategic spots that can be covered to escape negative reaction from, "three main groups: family members, close friends, and superiors at work."[121] It is in these settings that tattooing, a form of fashion, can straddles the line of imitation and differentiation. As the tattoos of 'enthusiasts' do make them part of a group, they also distinguish them from a larger culture. Where this differentiates itself from

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118 Atkinson, Michael. "Tattoo Enthusiasts: Subculture or figuration" The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 327.
119 Atkinson, Michael. "Tattoo Enthusiasts: Subculture or figuration" The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 340.
120 Ibid. 328.
121 Ibid. 337.

the subcultural 'style' of a group such as punk, is that where 'enthusiasts', "do indeed distinguish themselves from the non-tattooed, they may imitate them in normative settings."[122] This way of 'wearing' a subcultural style differs from the CCCS' theatrical version of dress, where clothing was an overtly performative series of items. In being able to cover one's so-called 'badges' indicating group membership, "subcultural distinctions can flourish in one place and go utterly unnoticed in another."[123]

In conducting ethnographic field research among those involved in the graffiti subculture, author Nancy Macdonald also moved to discover, "what was going on out there on the subcultural streets." [124] Largely made up of male participants, Macdonald entered a subculture where, "you are expected to leave all traces of 'real life" on its doorstep."[125] Substituting a 'real life' personal identity for a 'tag', or a stylised representation of an adopted name that is written in spray paint around the city, graffiti writers develop what Macdonald terms "'virtual' identity."[126] Similar to the conception of 'virtual' within Internet studies, which usually applied to the "formation of identity in cyberspace," [127] Macdonald noted one difference between the conceptions. Whereas a user employing a computer system relies on technology to reinvent themselves 'virtually', a graffiti writer

122 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 275.
123 Ibid. 275.
124 Ibid. 274.
125 Macdonald, Nancy. "The Graffiti Subculture: Makin a world of difference." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 312.
126 Ibid. 313.
127 Ibid. 316.

requires little more than a spray-can of paint to recreate themselves. Acting as a "stand-in or a double," the 'tag' that graffiti writers developed, "embodies and represents the individual who wrote it."[128] In describing the graffiti tag and notions of self, Macdonald writes,

> Their written names offer them a substitute for the self, a representation of the self, and embodiment of the self and an extension of the self. Basically, their written names appear to offer them another form of identity. Alongside a 'different' identity, removed from 'real life', writers also take on a 'virtual' identity, removed from 'physical life'.[129]

In allowing the paint to 'speak' for them, graffiti writers can reinvent themselves without physical notions, such as of sex, gender, and appearance.

With the physical body of the graffiti artist being of little importance to the subculture, 'style' in terms of clothing choices becomes a moot point. Within the graffiti culture, it is the end product - the tag - that is the focus. While what one might wear to 'tag' is not of concern, 'style' is still of major concern within the subcultural group. Having "a dynamic or robust appearance," graffiti lettering becomes the shifted site of 'style' in the subculture. As Macdonald notes, "[r]ather than clothe themselves, writers use their lettering styles to clothe their names,

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128 Macdonald, Nancy. "The Graffiti Subculture: Makin a world of difference." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 314.
129 Ibid. 314-315.

their virtual selves." [130] It is now a particular method of painting, rather than combat boots or spiked hair, which defines the 'style' of an individual.

With lettering styles on walls now "[replacing] fashion on bodies", the expression within graffiti culture looks past notions of class, as was imbedded in previous conceptions of 'style', to express notions of gender. With female graffiti not being able to easily "penetrate this liminal world"[131], a female 'writer' according to Macdonald, "comes into this subculture laden down with the baggage of her gender."[132] While it seems a contradiction that a subculture based on anonymity - where the physical body of the writer does not matter - should exclude members based on sex, Macdonald identified graffiti culture as "a man's world."[133]

What we see in graffiti culture is a shifting site and conception of 'style' that works outside the model set forth by Hebdige and the CCCS. Working outside the physical body Macdonald's study updates 'style' to include notions of gender rather than class. More importantly, Macdonald's conception of 'style' moves away from the consideration of clothing as the sole focus of study. By illustrating the way in which graffiti artists could reinvent themselves 'virtually' outside their bodies, post-subcultural studies open the possibility to examine an array of sources that constitute a form of subcultural style.

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130 Ibid. 318.
131 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to part five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 274
132 Macdonald, Nancy. "The Graffiti Subculture: Makin a world of difference." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 313.
133 Ibid. 313.

It is within the technological context of the term 'virtual' that I wish to suggest the next progression of subcultural style is taking place. Moving away from 'real life', the creation and proliferation online social-networking sites, such as MySpace.com, have created a new location of study where the definition of 'subcultural style' should now be reconsidered. As Dick Hebdige's work began to recognize the importance of a particular style of dress to "produce social identity for the participants themselves and distinguish those people from others,"[134] I would suggest that the textual, visual, and sometimes acoustic construction of a users MySpace page seeks to accomplish similar goals. As these new sites of identity formation have not yet been considered within subcultural or post-subcultural studies, I wish to examine a new type of 'digital subcultural style' that is developing amongst social-networking site users.

For those not familiar, the construction of MySpace page is made up of seven areas, which combine the usage of text, pictures, and sounds to make up the larger profile. While the overall layout of the MySpace page cannot be modified, as in where sections appear within the page, each of the smaller 'windows' or tables that make up the page can be manipulated by the user. Divided into what I will term the *primary window*, *blog*, *contact*, *about me*, *interests*, *details*, and *comments* sections, the textual and visual construction of

134 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to Part Five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 271.

the MySpace page looks to establish and reinforce subcultural group membership by creating a shared form of digital 'style' amongst its users.

Located in the top left-hand corner of the computer screen, the *primary window* inhabits a place of prominence within the MySpace page. Serving as an initial point of contact for user's visiting a new page, the selection of the text and graphics that appear in this section become central to the formation of a MySpace identity. Made up of the user's chosen name, a pictorial representation of the user, limited textual information – age, sex, location, and hyper-links to pictures and videos uploaded by the user, the *primary window* is the first customizable point within the user profile, and as such, it plays a central role in fashioning a new 'virtual' identity.

In the creation of a MySpace profile, the first task required of a new user is the creation of a name by which they will be known within the website. While some popular social-networking, such as Facebook[135], or Friendster[136] encourage users to create a profile using their 'real life' names, for ease of locating other site members, MySpace users largely adopt representational pseudonyms made up of letters and text-based symbols. As the user is given the ability to choose whatever configuration of name they wish, new members to the site begin the process of identity construction in this step, by essentially 'writing' themselves a new persona. It is also within this naming process that

135 "Welcome to Facebook." Facebook. <www.facebook.com>.
136 "Friendster." Friendster <www.friendster.com>

some users, who identify with larger subcultural groups, choose to include within their names direct or indirect subcultural references. As MySpace limits profile searches to 500 results, it is impossible to exactly determine how many such user-names are registered with the site. Entering a subcultural group name such as 'Goth' within the profile-search function, 500 results are returned, including names like: GothQueenB, Goth Doll, †ĜøтнÇнìlđ†[137], Goth VaMp, Goth Mom, and +GOTHROSE+.[138]

Like those graffiti artists studied within Nancy Macdonald's work, the ability to create a primary source of identity, the user-name, allows users to take on new personas outside of their 'real life' existences. The creation of a MySpace name works much like that of the creation of a graffiti tag, and in developing this 'virtual identity', "one's 'real life' or physical persona [is left] very much in the shadows."[139] In 'renaming' oneself within the on-line setting, the inclusion of a subcultural reference within the user-name seeks to "convey an attitude ... [and] plays a very important role in the process of constructing an identity."[140] The selection of a MySpace user-name inclusive of a subcultural reference, seeks to 'legitimize' and 'authenticate' the user within the larger subcultural group, through a process of association. Though this group affiliation

137 "MySpace - †ĜøтнÇнìlđ† - MySpace. 1 Apr. 2007 <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=4081004 >
138 "MySpace Search Result - 'Goth'" MySpace. 1 Apr. 2007 <http://searchservice.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=sitesearch.results&qry=Goth&type=People>.
139 Macdonald, Nancy. "The Graffiti Subculture: Making a world of difference." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 313.
140 Ibid. 316.

could only exist through only abstract connections, the selection of names such as Goth Doll or †ĜøтнÇнìłđ† make clear references of membership to a larger subcultural group. In doing so, one is sending a clear, "communication to the world about how one is feeling about oneself and what it is about oneself one would like to advertise."[141] In the selection of such 'subculturally-infused' names, there is little confusion surrounding perceived group membership on behalf of the user. While not all on-line subcultural participants within MySpace choose to name themselves in such ways, some preferring more subtle approaches to establishing group relations, those who do select names that include subcultural references create an initial form of 'digital style' in their name.

Should a MySpace user self-identify as Goth within their chosen user-name, all those visual cues associated with Goth subculture are then abstracted into a single point, their name. Through a semiotic 'reading' of the word Goth, those stylistic visual trends associated with the subculture, the: dark Victorian-styled clothing, the appropriated religious iconography- crucifixes, black hair and dark makeup, are all brought to mind. Clearly communicating "what it is about oneself one would like to advertise,"[142] to the world, this ability to name oneself presents the opportunity to synthesise subcultural visual cues into one textual instance. As all such connotations of the word Goth are implied within the user's name itself, the profile name then creates an abstracted form of 'style' merely

141 Feiner, J, and S Klein. "Graffiti Talks." Social Policy 12.3 (1982). 49.
142 Feiner, J, and S Klein. "Graffiti Talks." Social Policy 12.3 (1982). 49.

through its usage. Where physical clothing helped to signify group membership within Hebdige's classic notion of subcultural style, this 'on-line style' is more easily accomplished through textual inclusions that signify group membership.

Much like the text within the *primary window*, the textual inclusions in the *interests* section of the MySpace page serve to connect individuals under the umbrella of larger subcultural interests. Located below the *primary window*, the *interests* section is made up a user-generated list where MySpace participants are encouraged to enter their personal affinities, pertaining to favourite films, television shows, books, and musical groups or artists. As was previously noted, these interests once published within the networking page become HTML hyper-links which allow a user to find others with similar preferences or personal 'tastes'. In selecting one of these linked 'favourite items', a list of other users who have indicated the same interest in a given category will appear. It is in this relation of the user to the cultural products they have listed (films, books, TV shows, music), that another form of digital 'style' is established.

Included in the *interests* section, music serves as particularly strong binding agent that brings subcultural group participants together and gives them a common framework of relation. Having been identified by Simon Frith as an essential component of many contemporary youth cultures[143], subcultural studies have often looked at, "how individuals utilize music to construct collective

143 Frith, S. "Music and Identity." Questions of Cultural Identity. Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay. London: Sage, 1996. 108-127.

identities and ritualize identity."[144] Sarah Thorton's 1995 work *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* looked to British 'club culture' to examine how music knowledge becomes a form of what she calls "subcultural capital."[145] According to Thorton,

> Subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied*. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition 'white label' twelve-inches and the like).[146]

In this reconsidered form of 'capital', the more "in the know"[147] or versed on a subject (such as music) one is, the more 'rich' they are within the subculture. As music, "is seen as consequential in the creation of subcultures as well as a consequence of them," it becomes an integral part in the conception of subcultural identity.

While some MySpace users will incorporate a media player into their pages to play selected audio files, the presence of audible music is not needed to establish subcultural capital. The textual inclusions listed within the user's *interests* section can act in lieu of anything tangible. Whether or not a given Gothic song is audibly playing while you are viewing †ĜøтнÇнìłđ†'s MySpace

144 Williams, J, Patrick. "Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 35:2 (2006): 174.
145 Thorton, Sarah. Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital. Cambridge: Polity, 1995
146 Thorton, Sarah. "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital." The Post-Subcultures Reader. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 186.
147 Ibid. 186.

page for example, is not of the utmost importance. What supersedes the tangible is that it is referenced textually in some form or fashion. Where a clothing style in "classical subculture" is worn to signify a particular group association, these textual inclusions can also be 'worn' by the user to identify them within a subcultural group. It is these textual representations that become intentional forms of signification. The users physical appearance and subsequent "real life style" has little value in the online forum. The combined intersection of a user name (i.e. †ĜøтнÇнìłđ†) with the textual make up of one's MySpace profile creates an environment where abstract representations constitute a new form of style. Regardless of the actual group affiliation of a user like †ĜøтнÇнìłđ† in their everyday offline existence, the textual style constructed within the profile takes precedence over the physical.

In addition to this textual representations present on a MySpace page, users are also able to manipulate visual cues in order to establish a given subcultural style. Beginning with the most simplistic ability to change background and font colour, the user is able to "set a mood" for their page in keeping with their adopted persona. When one enters †ĜøтнÇнìłđ†'s profile one is immediately struck by the black background and blood red italic lettering that are stylistic traits inherently associated with the Gothic subculture. For the subculturally challenged, there exist personalization tools that will assist one in the creation of a page as emo, punk or goth as required. A site such as pimp-my-profile.com offers 71 pages consisting of over 710 pre-fabricated subcultural style

sheets that enable the average user to become Marilyn Manson or Johnny Rotten in the click of a button.[148]

In examining the pictorial representations of individuals on a website like MySpace, it is necessary to keep these signatory practices in mind to critically examine how users define themselves both personally, and as a part of a larger subcultural group. Following the ideas of author J.D. Prown, in his work *Art as Evidence*, these types of pictorial artefacts help to provide evidence of the "time and place, [and] the culture that produced them." [149]

In the online representations of self, a semiotic analysis of MySpace profile pictures allows us a tool to help decode the complex ways in which identity is constructed in a primarily visual setting. As Umberto Eco is quoted in Hebdige's work "I speak through my clothes,"[150] and in the online setting where identity is constructed through pictorial representations, users are left to speak through the images and text they choose to construct and post. What is transmitted to other users on MySpace, are not just the pictorial representation of self presented, but a "range of messages which are transmitted through the finely graded distinctions of a number of interlocking sets- class and status, self-image and attractiveness."[151] Style in the online pictorial setting becomes an intentional and intricate form of communication when expressing personal and group identity

148 "Pimp My Profile." Pimp My Profile.com. 6 Apr. 2007 <http://www.pimp-my-profile.com/>.
149 Prown, Jules D. "Style as Evidence." Art as Evidence : Writings on Art and Material Culture. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. 64.

150 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 100.
151 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 101.

to other users. Members of the MySpace site post visual representations that Roland Barthes identifies as "pure image[s],"[152] which provides a series of signs and messages that when decoded can illustrate meaning contained within. In displaying an image on MySpace that stylistically identifies a user as a member of a particular subcultural group, the user is expressing the "communication of a significant difference."[153] Hebdige, in his work, began to recognize the importance of a particular style of dress which was constructed to "produce social identity for the participants themselves and distinguish those people from others."[154] In examining the pictorial representations of individuals on a website like MySpace, it is necessary to keep these signatory practices in mind to critically examine how users define themselves both personally, and as a part of a larger group. A semiotic analysis of these presented images allows us to "read style for its cultural significances, for what it says about a subculture."[155] In doing so we are able to 'read' these visual signs as they are presented by the user, and help to analyze the formation of a subcultural identity in its pictorial form.

In the MySpace setting, the pictorial image of the user becomes abstracted to tell what theorist Anne Reynolds refers to as "visual stories,"[156]

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152 Barthest,Roland. "Rhetoric of the Image." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. New York: Routledge, 2002. 135.
153 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: the Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 102.
154 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to Part Five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 271.
155 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to Part Five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 273.
156 Reynolds, Ann. "Visual Stories." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002. 324-338.

through attributing "information to images through conceptually related visual cues."[157] As a person is able to do in an everyday setting, the MySpace user is able to read the visual content that is contained within an image. In the MySpace setting, such a reading is necessary to help in determining notions of the personal identity the user is trying to convey. Occupying such an important spot in the construction of an online identity, this selected representational image of self highlights the "new visual subjectivity"[158] present in this pictorial turn.

As has been shown, researchers have long identified both socio-economic as well as distinct aesthetic / stylistic commonalities among 'fringe' or subcultural groups. Tracing the development of 'subcultural style' from the Zoot-suit to the fetish-wear of the Punk subculture, I have highlighted how subcultures have assembled so-called sordid items to 'speak' about themselves. In identifying the movement of subcultural 'style' outside physical body through the graffiti-based work of Nancy Macdonald, post-subcultural studies has opened the possibilities of study to examine an array of sources that constitute forms of subcultural style.

In outlining the makeup of a MySpace page (*primary window*, *blog*, *contact*, *about me*, *interests*, *details*, and *comments* sections), I have suggested that a form of 'digital style' is created through the pastiche approach of profile formation

157 Reynolds, Ann. "Visual Stories." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002.324.
158 Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The Subject of Visual Culture." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002. 10.

on MySpace. Within the online setting, where identity is constructed through pictorial representations, users are left to speak through the images and text they choose to construct and post.

Chapter Three:

Identity Abstracted – From Having to Appearing

The growing significance of images within the MySpace setting points to the development of what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls a "visual culture."[159] In updating Rene Descartes's early conception of self – "I think therefore I am", Mirzoeff sees the mantra of the modern-visual world to be, "I am seen and I see that I am seen."[160] Defined by what he terms "intervisuality, the simultaneous display and interaction of a variety of modes of visuality,"[161] Mirzoeff's notion of 'visual culture' constitutes a world where visual representation takes on an added form of subjective importance. In a time of almost infinite visibility, the modern person, according to Mirzoeff, is "now teaching themselves to be media." Through the proliferation of cameras and digital camcorders, these new visual subjects constantly record and broadcast the world around them, making "endless overlapping records of their memories ... at any event of public or private importance."[162] It would be in this world formed around digital images that Mirzoeff saw the masses "learning to see like computers,"[163] where multiple viewpoints were considered simultaneously. Defining this way of seeing as the

159 Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The Subject of Visual Culture." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002. 10.
160 Ibid. 10.
161 Ibid. 3.
162 Ibid. 11.
163 Ibid. 11.

"transverse glance,"[164] the multiple perspectives of the contemporary subject "can help triangulate the viewer in relation to herself, the watchers and the watched."[165] Focusing on these 'multi-perspective' views, studies within this newly emerging 'visual culture' focus not just images themselves but on all those things surrounding an image. According to Irit Rogoff, studies in visual culture,

> open up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds, and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meanings and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, artworks, buildings or urban environments.[166]

Where prior studies of visual elements, such as TV shows, advertising, etc., looked to study the semiotic 'meaning' of such products in their relation to another work in the same media, visual culture studies looked to broaden this approach. Within visual culture, theorists looked to the "free play of the signifier ... in relation to images, sounds or spaces not necessarily perceived to operate in a direct, causal, or episodic relation to either their context or to one another."[167] Founded on the idea of multiplicity, studies in visual culture considered not only

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164 Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The Subject of Visual Culture." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002. 16.
165 Ibid.18.
166 Rogoff, Irit. "Studying Visual Culture." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002. 24.
167 Ibid. 25.

the interplay of visual elements, but all those things that surround the visual products. As visual images, "never come 'pure'... [they are] always 'contaminated' by the work of other senses (hearing, touch, smell), touched by other text and discourses,"[168] such a multifaceted approach is necessary to decipher their meaning. Within the setting of MySpace, such approaches as those found within visual studies, are necessary to examine how MySpace users 'reconstruct' them-selves though a hybridized form of digital identity.

As Sherry Turkle has now famously noted in her 1995 work *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, "[w]hen we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass."[169] Following the ideas of psychoanalytic theorist Jaques Lacan, who Turkle read to be poststructuralist in his approach to notions of self, Turkle saw the virtual realm as one where online identity was not made up of a single 'self', but many simultaneous identities. In returning to the work of Sigmund Freud around the idea of the ego, Lacan saw, "the complex chains of associations that constitute meaning for each individual leading to no final endpoint or core self."[170] Instead of being made up of one solitary source, the

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10 Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. "Narrativizing Visual Culture." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. London: Routledge, 2002. 55.
169 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 177.
170 Ibid. 178.

'self' in Lacan's view existed in a "realm of discourse."[171] Rather than being "a permanent structure of the mind,"[172] the discursive view of 'self' in Lacan's work echoed developments within computer science where "bottom-up, distributed, parallel, and emergent models of mind have replaced top-down, information processing ones."[173] It is within this progression of technological studies and Lacan's work that Turkle identified multiplicity as the key to the examination of online identity.

Created in 1980 by Essex College classmates Roy Traubshaw and Richard Bartle[174], it would be an electronic version of the role-playing board game Dungeons and Dragons that would form both the basis of Turkle's study, as well as providing the technological blueprint on which social networking sites such as MySpace would be built from. Developed during his last year at Essex College, Traubshaw developed the game he called MUD (for Multi-User Dungeons) out of a love for fantasy role-playing games, and posted it online the following year with the help of Richard Bartle. Based on fantasy series' such as Star Trek, The Hobbit, or Ann McCaffrey's novels "about dragon riders and wizards,"[175] MUDs offered players the ability to interact in text-based settings,

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171 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 178.
172 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 178.
173 Ibid. 178.
174 Kelly, Kevin, and Howard Rheingold. "The Dragon Ate My Homework." Wired July-Aug. 1993.
175 Ibid.

where users participated in various forms of online quests. As the user explored the created worlds through textual commands, they would discover treasures and clues that would lead them along to the final treasure. Along the path to this final end-point, the player would be required to complete such tasks as, "breaking a spell, becoming a wizard, slaying a dragon, or escaping from a dungeon."[176] Interacting in this environment, users would explore the world around them by typing commands such as,

> "Look skull." The computer replies: "The skull says, 'Beware of the rat.' "
> You type: "Look grate," and the computer replies: "This way lies Death."
> You type: "Go north," and you exit through the tunnel, on your way into the unknown of the next room.[177]

While initial incarnations of the game and subsequent spin-offs were centered on the fantasy world of Dungeons and Dragons, players began to interact with one another in, "a variety of real-time 'chat' modes, not the kind of bulletin-board style communications [one would] find on BBSes or the WELL."[178] The emphasis on real-time communication made the MUDs different from previous technology such as 'Bulletin Board Systems', or BBSes, where users exchanged asynchronous text-based messages. In the MUDs, it became "very much about

176 Kelly, Kevin, and Howard Rheingold. "The Dragon Ate My Homework." Wired July-Aug. 1993.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.

who is in the same place at the same time, and how they interact," which turned the MUDs, "[in to] more of a hangout than a publication, more like a game board than a bulletin board."[179] The development of MediaMOO in 1992 by Amy Bruckman and Mitchel Resnick, both graduate researchers at MIT's Media Lab, ushered in a more generalized usage of the MUD system. MediaMoo, which was defined as "Media MUD, Object Oriented,"[180] used the MUD architecture to allow academics interested in online communities to interact with one another in real-time. In bringing the focus of the MUD program away from its sci-fi / fantasy roots, Bruckman and Resnick opened the usage of MUDs or MOOs to a more general public who were looking for a way to use new online technologies to communicate with one another. It would be within the 'adventure' and "social MUDS,"[181] that Sherry Turkle would conduct her online investigation in the lives and identities of MUD participants.

In the creation of an 'online self', Turkle refers to the character one creates for themselves as their "personae," taken from the Latin, "*per sonae* which means 'that through which the sound comes."[182] Originally referring to an actor's mask, the creation of a persona allows the subject to create a "public face distinct

179 Kelly, Kevin, and Howard Rheingold. "The Dragon Ate My Homework." Wired July-Aug. 1993.
180 Ibid.
181 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 181
182 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 182.

from some deeper essence or essences."[183] In the online setting, the MUD participant created a 'public face' through their textual interaction with other users and the world around them. Formed around writing, Turkle found this new form of interaction, "somewhere between traditional written and oral communication."[184] Made up of a hybrid between a writing and 'speech', this new way of communication was distinct in that it was "speech momentarily frozen into artefact, but curiously ephemeral."[185] Unless it was recorded, the textual 'conversations' between participants would vanish with the continuation of a discussion.

The creation of such new online 'spaces' allowed MUD users to create a new form of identity that was privy to the virtual setting. Formed around anonymity, the MUD user was not only able to create a textual 'self', but also an environment or world for that new 'self' to live in. As a MUD participant is quoted in Turkle's work,

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever, You can be just whoever You want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be. ... They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They

183 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 182.
184 Ibid. 182.
185 Ibid. 182.

don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see is your words.[186]

With the opportunity to recreate oneself textually, Turkle looked to traditional notions of identity that focused on a notion of 'authenticity.' As Lacan's work moved identity towards ideas of multiplicity, Turkle saw the ability of online communications to "actively subvert"[187] conceptions of 'self' that were singular in their formation. In the construction of these virtual 'spaces,' an environment was created, "where persona and self merge ... where the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self."[188] In joining notions of a constructed and 'real' self, MUDS formed a unique space where one could fashion and live-out essentially fictitious existences. Where the traditional 'role-playing' aspect of initial MUDs in their Dungeons and Dragons configuration allowed one to "step in and out of a character," MUDs offered users the ability to parlay these 'characters' into "parallel identities."[189] Seeing the technological capacity of a computer to act as "a tool, as [a] mirror, and as a gateway to a world through the looking glass of the screen," Turkle's work looked to highlight a new 'digital subjectivity' that was emerging in the early 1990s.

While such notions surrounding online identity formation have been addressed by theorists like Turkle, websites like MySpace and those found within

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186 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 182.
187 Ibid. 185.
188 Ibid. 185.
189 Ibid. 185.

the so-called 'Web 2.0' show distinct differences in formal qualities, as compared to the online communities analyzed in the past. As has been noted, The MUDs that Turkle studied were constructed from text only, as the contemporary Internet did not have the technical ability to display pictures. Subsequent developments in programming languages used to display web-pages, such as HTML - HyperText Markup Language, allowed the creation of web-pages that included static images and basic sounds. No longer bound to text alone, Turkle identified the beginning of this 'new internet' through the creation of online 'home pages' or personal web-sites, where content was generated and displayed by a single user. Through the composition of, "words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites on the Internet or the Web,"[190] this technological shift in the Internets ability to display visual inclusions greatly altered how users were able to represent themselves. Where prior users were bound to text, those publishing web pages could now craft an online 'self' through an assembly of pictures. As such, an added consideration should be given to this 'pastiche' approach of identity formation that is still present in modern incarnations of the Internet.

In the contemporary setting of MySpace, identity now becomes defined through the interplay of textual inclusions and the selection of images displayed

190 Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 258.

by the user. Located within the *primary window*, the selected 'default image' becomes integral to the formation of an online identity, as it acts as the initial point of contact in conjunction with the chosen user name. Carefully selected to portray a manifestation of 'self' through visual representation, the 'default image' looks to establish and reinforce an online 'identity' by digitally re-creating the user online. As with their off-line counterparts, particular forms or 'styles' of clothing in these pictures look to "produce social identity for the participants themselves and distinguish those people from others."[191] Acting as a form of communication when expressing personal and group identity to other users, the way in which users within these social networking sites define themselves visually becomes a defining characteristic on user-pages.

In the profile pages of those MySpace members that subscribe to larger subcultural group memberships, the way in which users 'define' themselves visually is very distinctive. Adopting and displaying imagery which is stylistically related to a particular subcultural group, such users employ pictorial representations to summarize and visually represent both personal and group identity. Within the profile of MySpace user +GOTHROSE+[192], we see how pictorial inclusions serve to both establish an individual gothic identity, as well as tying the personal identity back to the larger gothic subculture. Located within the *primary window* of +GOTHROSE+'s MySpace profile, a cropped facial shot of

191 Gelder, Ken. "Introduction to Part Five." The Subcultures Reader. Ed. Ken Gelder. New York: Routledge, 2005. 271.
192 "+GOTHROSE+." MySpace. 8 June 2008 <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=388146001>.

a female with black hair and black clothing acts as the introductory or default image of the webpage. Cropped just below the eyes, such a profile image would not be that distinctive, had the opened mouth of the subject within the picture not be agape with large sharpened canine teeth. Brandishing fangs, the pictorial subject has blood running down the left side of her face, as if she were a vampire who had just bitten an unsuspecting victim. Such a representation of self inhabits a unique signatory position, where a picture is meant to denote a dual form of abstracted identity. In identifying +GOTHROSE+, such an image points both to a form of personal identity, as well as a membership in a larger subculture. Scattered through out the MySpace page, 'dark' images containing references to vampires and the drinking of blood, all point the viewer back to the stylistic traits of the gothic subculture. Acting as a visual precursor to the *interests* section of the page, a picture entitled 'vampire prince' displays the shadowed face of a male drinking blood from what looks to be a slit wrist. Interplaying with +GOTHROSE+'s textual inclusions, which state her desire to meet "new & intersting people, vampires, weird, unusually & freaky things,"[193] these images mix with text to establish a hybridized online 'goth' identity. Harkening back to Hebdige's description of punk fashion as a "cacophony on the visual level,"[194] such an online construction of style could be dually noted. In its construction, +GOTHROSE+'s user page is composed of a collection of

193 "+GOTHROSE+." MySpace. 8 June 2008 <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=388146001>.
194 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 26.

assembled images, all referring back to themes such as blood, vampires, sexual fetish items, Christian and Wiccan religious iconography, gothic music figures such as Marilyn Manson and HIM (His Infernal Majesty), and drugs or drug paraphernalia. Much like punk's clothing style, these items which are "borrowed from the most sordid of contexts,"[195] once again take on a symbolic meaning in referring to a larger gothic subcultural membership. Even the background of the page is modified to display a large burial headstone, a gothic-style cross complete with skulls at its base, where ever the user scrolls within the page.

These so-called "tokens of a self-imposed exile," [196] display themselves visually in the online setting as a pastiche of borrowed images. Constructing an identity through representations, MySpace users are able to abstract images to serve as a form personal and group identity. What is most interesting in such representations of self as contained within the profile of users like +GOTHROSE+ or †ĜøтнÇнìłđ†[197], is that at no point within the main MySpace user page does an actual picture of their 'real life' selves appear. In the case of †ĜøтнÇнìłđ†, the chosen pictorial representation of 'self' within the *primary window* is that of another 'real life' person, all together. In employing a picture of musician Amy Lee, the front-woman for an American band Evanescence, †ĜøтнÇнìłđ† presents a form of abstracted personal identity that is triangulated through references to outside sources. As Evanescence is considered to be a

195 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 107.
196 Ibid. .2.
197 "†ĜøтнÇнìłđ†." MySpace. 4 April 2007 <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=388146001>.

'dark' band, albeit a more popular 'dark' band within main-stream music, the connection to a larger subculture is intended. Once again, such everyday objects as a picture of a rock star are employed to 'speak' about their owners, though the intent of this type of 'digital speech' is slightly different. While the fashion of so called 'marginal discourses' developed within Hebdige's subcultural groups served to act as a mechanism "of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation,"[198] these new signatory practices have more in common with ideas of inclusion, than resistance. While style under Hebdige's work looked to symbolically combat a stringent British class system, modern online signatory practices seem more concerned with the formation of a stylized subcultural identity.

In some cases, such a stylized subcultural identity can be created and reinforced through proxy. Employing similar visual characteristics to those found within +GOTHROSE+'s or †ĜøтнÇнìłđ†'s profiles, the page of MySpace user known simply as "Goth"[199] also looks to create a digitally rendered 'gothic' identity. Built around the background image of a church, Goth uses a collection of assembled images and sound to create a pastiche approach to identity formation. Describing himself as a 70 year old man from "you know where, Ohio," Goth lists his personal interests to include "Looking at my reflection in the glass,

198 Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979. 90.
199 "Goth." MySpace - Goth. 03 June 2006 <http://www.myspace.com/gothguy1869>.

Playing music, bleeding !!!"[200] While the page is somewhat muted in comparison to that of other gothic MySpace users like +GOTHROSE+, due to a lesser number of visual inclusions referencing vampires and blood, Goth's subcultural identity is pictorially reinforced through the collection and display of his top twenty 'friends' on MySpace. Located next to the *details* section within the profile page, MySpace users have the ability to choose whether they will display who they have befriended within the site. Should the user choose to do so, they are given the ability to display their so called 'top friends', those they feel make up their closest relations on the MySpace site. Having befriended two hundred and seventy-four people within the site, Goth's top twenty 'friends' have been chosen for prominent display within the profile page. Having user names such as VampGoth, †murderкιττιe†, P-i-x-i-C-o-r-p-s-e, and PainIsLove[201], Goth's all-female top twenty 'friends' have distinct stylistic inclusions in their profile / default pictures that indicate they are gothic subculture members, as well. Dressed in dark clothing with distinctive gothic-styled makeup (black lipstick, heavy eyeliner, pale-white foundation), all twenty members' default photos work in conjunction with the 'dark' style of the page to reinforce Goth's subcultural identity. While it is impossible to confirm if such online 'friendships' made between MySpace users can create lasting relationships fitting the traditional conception of what a 'friend' is, such pictorial displays online work to signify something more than who one

200 "Goth." MySpace - Goth. 03 June 2006 <http://www.myspace.com/gothguy1869>.
201 "Goth." MySpace - Goth. 03 June 2006 <http://www.myspace.com/gothguy1869>.

befriends. Such a selection of which 'friends' will appear in this section holds a form of visual importance very similar to that of the 'default image' selection. As with other images included in the MySpace profile, the display of other users' profile pictures turns such images into pictorial symbols, which look to denote larger subcultural group membership. While Goth's pictorial inclusions referencing gothic subculture might be sparse, subcultural identity is pictorially reinforced through mere association.

In her later work *What are We Thinking about When We are Thinking about Computers?*'[202], Turkle proposes that CMC allow users to see identity as multiple rather than being singular, as online identities are external abstracted representations formed by the user. Echoing this idea of abstracted identity is Internet theorist Lisa Nakamura. In her work "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Radical Passing on the Internet,"[203] Nakamura is sceptical of online identity formation as it allows for what she calls "identity tourism."[204] As the online user is able to detach themselves from real world personal identities, the abstractive process that takes place online allows the user to play "fantasy other"[205] with no personal connection to the character they play.

What allows this abstraction in the MySpace setting to begin to take place, is the de-temporalization of time and space that the user experiences. The user

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202 Turkle, Sherry. "What are We Thinking About When We are Thinking About Computers?" The Science Studies Reader. Ed. M. Biagoli. London: Routledge, 1999.
203 Nakamura, Lisa. "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet." The Cybercultures Reader. Ed. David Bell and Barbara Kennedy. London: Routledge, 2000.
204 Ibid. 714.
205 Ibid. 719.

within this abstractive process is able to create identity through a weakened sense of personal historicity that is created when in the virtual setting of MySpace. Online, identity loses conventional notions of time and space, which in the traditional offline world can greatly shape the formation of personal identity. Space is needed in order to navigate experience, and as Michel Foucault writes, "space itself has a history in Western experience and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space."[206] This compression of time and space has shifted due to what theorist David Harvey has identified as the "transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation."[207] With this accelerated turnover in the time of production, a commodity is able to circulate at greater speeds through technologies such as electronic banking, and the introduction of 'plastic money', or credit cards. Time and space become compressed and conflated in points; as commodity loses its physical ties it detaches itself from a tangible form. While it is important to note that the user is not able to go online to completely "detach from the body,"[208] and thus escape all 'real world' historicity; the online self is able to re-form notions of identity with relative ease. Removed from time and space, the subject / user are free to reconstruct identity at will. An absence of historicity removes any shaping force of control and allows a

206 Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." The Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. New York: Routledge, 2002. 229.
207 Harvey, David. The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990.
208 Slater, Don. "Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline." Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs. Ed. Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone. London: Sage, 2002. 536.

MySpace profile user to invent and change identities, all by the selection and presentation of visual imagery.

As identity in the online setting is fluid, as it can be developed and modified at will. Visual culture in its offline incarnation is now hyper-accelerated, and the role of the image when further abstracted in the absence of time and space, comes to both summarize and visually represent personal / group identity. Once established, visual identity becomes a form of pictorial information, and is transmitted to other users according to the new dynamics of the network space. In network-culture, messages and information no longer travel from person to person under a traditional sender-receiver model. Instead, they "spread and interact, mix and mutate within a singular (yet differentiated) informational plane."[209] Mimicking the underlying structure of the network, MySpace users are able to jump in and out of social networks in a nonlinear path by navigating a networked series of user images. Identity becomes entangled within the "wider informational processes that determine the spread of images and words, sounds and affects across a hyper-connected planet."[210] While text can be used to link users, the profile image is at the forefront of how users navigate their way through the online community.

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209 Terranova, Tiziana. Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age. London: Pluto P, 2004. 2.
210 Terranova, Tiziana. Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age. London: Pluto P, 2004. 2.

While the visual display of social status or group membership is not something that is unique to the MySpace setting, what does differentiate it from other places of identity formation is the fact that in this online setting, abstraction is now the basis for the development of personal identity. As a member of the Situationist International, or SI, which formed in France in 1957,[211] French-Situationist theorist Guy Debord looked to the changing ways in which this signification process worked in modern capitalism. In his work *The Society of the Spectacle*[212], Debord identified the ways in which the Marxian notion of commodity had been altered by modern consumer society, and dubbed the resulting abstractive process the 'Spectacle'. Basing his analysis on the, "everyday experience of the impoverishment of life, its fragmentation into more and more widely separated spheres, and the disappearance of any unitary aspect from society,"[213] Debord identified 'the image' as the site where the fragmented pieces of life returned together to form a pleasant-looking whole. Those things that were lacking in a person's day to day existence "could be found within the spectacle, conceived of as an ensemble of independent representations."[214] As separation was "the alpha and omega of the spectacle,"

211 Knabb, Ken, ed. Situationist International Anthology. Trans. Ken Knabb. Berkley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995. ix.
212 Debord, Guy. The Society of the Spectacle. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. 3rd ed. New York: Zone Books, 1995.
213 Jappe, Anslem. Guy Debord. London: University of California P, 1999. 6.
214 Jappe, Anslem. Guy Debord. London: University of California P, 1999. 6.

[215] individuals who have become separated from each other could, according to Debord, only find unity in the spectacle. Made up of "images detached from every aspect of life merge[d] into a common stream," [216] the spectacle through its abstractions creates a "social relationship between people that is mediated by images." [217] While the inherent problem with this process does not rest in the images themselves, rather "in the society that needs such images,"[218] this spectacular process was the fault of modern capitalism. Continuing the Marxist economic idea of commodity contained in *Capital*[219], Debord identified what he saw as a shift away from the Marxian "downgrading of being into having" to a continued progression "from having to appearing."[220] Here the physical commodity, normally attributed to the accumulation of 'things', is abstracted from an actualized form into the realm of the virtual - where appearance is now valued. In the online setting of MySpace, this abstraction takes place within the creation and presentation of images used to define identity. The images posted on a MySpace user's page become abstracted into 'spectacular' representations of self. In this abstraction process, "all effective 'having' must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate raison d'être from appearance."[221] This idea

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215 Debord, Guy. The Society of the Spectacle. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. 3rd ed. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 20.
216 Ibid. 12.
217 Ibid. 12.
218 Jappe, Anslem. Guy Debord. London: University of California P, 1999. 8.
219 Marx, Karl. Capital. Ed. Friedrich Engels. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.
220 Debord, Guy. The Society of the Spectacle. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. 3rd ed. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 16.
221 Debord, Guy. The Society of the Spectacle. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. 3rd ed. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 16.

of abstraction is very similar to the one presented by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*[222], where reality and meaning have come to be replaced by abstracted symbols and signs.

As with notions of personal identity, MySpace users inhabit an online world founded on abstraction and representation where actualized affiliation to a social group is not important, rather the appearance of membership to such a group suffices. The aforementioned 'gothic' images presented in +GOTHROSE+ or †ĜøтнÇнìlđ†'s MySpace pages generate subcultural 'meaning' by appearing the part. Within the MySpace setting, this abstractive process commodifies personal identity through visual representations of self, and turns them in to a form of pictorial information. Though this notion of identity is formed around "the simple issue of deception and authenticity,"[223] this distilled form of personal information acts now as an abstracted notion of the user, and thus cannot be a whole identity. Representations of a user's whole identity then extend beyond the personal information that they have entered into the friendships and affiliations they have linked onto their profile page. Whether these connections or friendships are founded in the real world or not is almost unimportant as it is the appearance of having connections which contributes to the construction of a user's online identity.

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222 Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1994.
223 Slater, Don. "Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline." Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs. Ed. Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone. London: Sage, 2002. 536.

Subcultures commodification by the larger consumer culture means that goods are produced and sold as part of an idea similar to that of Theodor Adorno in *The Culture Industry*.[224] A new form of commodity fetishism appears, and instead of applying to the classically held idea of physical commodity, this new form of virtualized commodity applies to that of the image. In the setting of MySpace, it is subcultural identity that becomes abstracted and subsequently commodified within the site. This process is an example of "when materiality is replaced by information,"[225] information being in this case the pictorial representations that are abstracted to denote subcultural identity. The online world of MySpace can be viewed similarly to how Debord saw the growing consumerist culture of the late nineteen-sixties. To Debord "the world we see is the world of the commodity,"[226] and the online world of abstracted representations should be viewed this way as well. Coupled with how this abstraction process takes place online is the idea questioning why this type of abstraction would benefit both user and producer. In the case of the MySpace user pictorial representations identifying users with particular subcultural groups, this establishes Sarah Thornton's idea of 'subcultural capital.' This new interpretation of capital is different from its classical economic roots, and refers to status gained within a society that rewards those who benefit by this membership

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224 Adorno, Theodor. The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture. London: Routledge, 1991.
225 Shaviro, Steven. Connected: What It Means to Live in a Networked Society. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2003. 19.
226 Debord, Guy. The Society of the Spectacle. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. 3rd ed. New York: Zone Books, 1995. 29.

as appearing 'cool', or 'in the know' as to the latest trends. The MySpace user benefits socially from this association with an elevated sense of social status, being 'hip' according to author John Leland, as it "exists in public view, its parameters defined by the people watching it."[227] To exist, if only in stylistic affiliation with a subcultural group, is desired. For the producers of MySpace, the return from this abstractive process in twofold. First, the existence of this concept of subcultural capital is profitable in a real-world commodity setting. In order to appear the part of the subcultural group member, individuals still need physical commodities and newly developed services to play the parts.

As appearances can be easily modified in the online setting, a small industry has developed around the growing importance of this new virtual space. Created to be," the first company to address the beauty-related concerns of our cyber-conscious culture,"[228] PicWash.com is an enhancement and retouching site dedicated solely to the modification of online photos. Offering "beauty enhancement" services, such as red eye reduction, virtual teeth whitening services, and online 'skin treatments' to remove acne, PicWash.com is dedicated to making your 'virtual self' look better than the real thing. In their 'about us' section, the founders of PicWash note,

> In our increasingly digital society, the desire to look good is no longer limited only to our physical presence. As the internet is used

227 Leland, John. Hip: the History. New York: Harper Perennial, 2004.
228 "PicWash." PicWash. 03 Dec. 2007 <http://www.picwash.com/>.

> more and more to communicate with family, friends, and coworkers, there is an increasing pressure to optimize one's web presence- not only what is written about them but the way that they look on the web. Many people see each other more often via the internet than in real life.

PicWash founder Daniel Ciraldo began the upstart business "[a]fter watching his younger sisters painstakingly attempt to retouch their snapshots before uploading them to their MySpace and Facebook profiles."[229] Such attention to physical detail is hyper-accelerated in the online setting, as these virtual representations become intricate parts of online identity formation. The accelerated importance of the 'pictorial self' makes such enhancement seem necessary, as the image comes to the forefront. As social networking sites are now first points of contact, or the lone form of communication between people, the online 'self' becomes more and more important. Modified and altered at will, online appearance takes on a hyper-accelerated form with the help of such photographic tools, to accomplish a personalized representation that would not be possible in 'real life.' This growing virtual-based area of business is a booming one, and those wishing to capitalize on the possibilities that these new sites of interaction, such as MySpace, could yield are now beginning to acquire virtual spaces at an alarming

229 "Beauty Queen." Nylon Nov. 2007: 88.

rate. As this 'commodity of the image' is entirely virtual, there are no production costs, making the producer a complete profit.

As has been shown in the previous examples the role of the image takes on an added importance within a visual culture. Images posted within user pages become symbolic representations of a subcultural identity. Once abstracted this subcultural identity becomes a form of information that can then be used by businesses in order to target a specific group for services and commodities. As will be illustrated in the next section this information also becomes vulnerable to the control of the Vectoralist class, allowing this group to take what was originally subversive information and turning it into something that can be mass marketed to a mainstream culture.

Chapter Four:

Information Society and the Vectoralist Class

As was noted in the previous chapter, there exists in the MySpace setting an abstractive process which looks to commodify subcultural identity through textual and visual representations of 'self'. Once abstracted, such representations are turned in to a form of information, falling in line with the economic goals of the contemporary 'information society.' Upon being commodified as information, this abstracted form of personal identity becomes vulnerable to the control of what theorist McKenzie Wark has identified as the "vectoralist class."[230] In his work *A Hacker Manifesto*, Wark identifies a modern continuation of class struggle, one in which information "has replaced capital as the dominant exploiting class."[231] Identifying the historical process of abstraction within capitalism, Wark writes,

> Land is the detachment of a resource from nature, an aspect of the productive potential of nature rendered abstract, in the form of property. Capital is the detachment of a resource from land, an aspect of the productive potential of land rendered abstract in the form of property. Information is the detachment of a resource from capital already detached from land. It is the double of the double. It

230 Wark, McKenzie. A Hacker Manifesto. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2004. Thesis 29.
231 Ibid. Thesis 32.

> is a further process of abstraction beyond capital, but one that yet again produces its separate existence in the form of property.[232]

Within this progression, information is the latest form of commodity twice abstracted in the process of capitalism. Now, instead of operating in the realm of physical commodity as the basis of class relations, the vectoralist class "so named because they control the vectors along which information is abstracted,"[233] rely on information as the form of commodity that they seek to control. While media technologies have long been used by capitalism to, "[train] the populace in widespread consumption of standardized commodity goods,"[234] they have only recently become sites for the production for goods themselves. Wark's reading of the negative impacts of vectoralist control operates in stark opposition to those utopian possibilities of the 'information society' previously presented. Holding control over the "vectors of communication,"[235] or those large scale social, technical, and media networks in the modern 'network society', vectoralist position themselves to control the very infrastructure of modern society.

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232 Wark, McKenzie. A Hacker Manifesto. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2004. Thesis 17.
233 Ibid. Thesis 29.
234 Ibid. Thesis 117.
235 Ibid. Thesis 32.

It is within this vectoralist process that "abstracting of information from any particular material support creates the very possibility of a vectoral society."[236] Removing information from any material connection accomplishes the goal of the vectoralist project, and allows the emerging vectoralist class to continue to produce and control information for economic gain, as well as notions of control over subordinate classes. According to Wark, "the commodification of information means the enslavement of the world to those whose margins depend on information's scarcity, the vectoral class."[237] It is within this process that power relations are formed, and a clear hierarchy develops.

Such a hierarchy develops within MySpace as the vectoral class gains power, in that they are in direct control of information. As illustrated, information is the main commodity in the MySpace setting, and as such the vectoralist class assumes control. Theorist Manuel Castells in his text *The Power of Identity* examines identity as it refers to social actors, and states: "Identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through the process of individuation."[238] Thus in this setting, identity serves as the source of power. If the vectoralist class controls the abstractive process of how identity is formed in MySpace, they in turn have the majority of power. Castells goes on to write "identities are stronger sources of meaning than roles because of the

236 Wark, McKenzie. A Hacker Manifesto. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 2004. Thesis 127.
237 Ibid. Thesis 132.
238 Castells, Manuel. The Power of Identity. Maiden, Mass: Blackwell, 1997. 7.

process of self construction and individuation that they involve."[239] If identity organizes the meaning while societal roles instead organize functions, it is more debilitating for individuals to be detached from their identities, and thus from the power derived from constructing meaning from this identity.

Although MySpace gives the impression to individual users that they can freely construct their own identity online without restriction, it should be noted that both the structure of the network as well as the filtering processes set in place by the vectoralist class affect the online construction of self within MySpace. The abstractive process which exists in MySpace can be, in part, attributed to the fact the website exists within the larger networked space of the Internet. In order to represent oneself online, a form of abstraction must take place to digitally re-create a user electronically. This consideration of the networked nature of MySpace should not, however, negate a critical examination of those wishing to capitalize on the economic possibilities that these new sites of interaction yield. With the growing importance of online networking sites, large media conglomerates are now beginning to acquire virtual spaces at a staggering rate. In doing so, the vectoralist class is influencing the means of production, and in turn influences how one is able to the construction of online identities. There is a hidden structure of protocol, codes and passwords within MySpace, which in addition to the registration process, is highly mediated. Although giving the

239 Castells, Manuel. The Power of Identity. Maiden, Mass: Blackwell, 1997. 7.

illusion individual users have full power in creating their profile, the way in which the registration process has certain required fields and default settings, points to a hidden structure that determines how the user is able to go about creating their profile page. In designating the structure of the MySpace page to include those *primary window*, *blog*, *contact*, *about me*, *interests*, *details*, and *comments* sections, the type of 'identity' that is created is highly stylized. Though users are able to create a form of digital 'style' through the presentation of visual cues associated with a larger groups' subculture

If the construction of identity has as much power and meaning as discussed earlier, with the lack of actual self creation and the limits on how one can distinguish their profile from other users' presentation of profiles, the structure of MySpace negates the possibility of the user being in full control of their identity. Furthermore, in controlling the means of production, MySpace becomes what theorist Antonio Negri refers to as "the factory without walls,"[240] in this case producing meaning through the construction of identity. According to Negri, this factory is able to exist "with the indispensable aid of information technologies, disseminated into society, deterritorializing, dispersing, and decentralizing its operations."[241] MySpace in this case acts as the vehicle for the abstracting and decentralizing process in which personal identity is subjected.

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240 Dyer-Witherford, Nick. Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism. Chicago: Univesity of Illinois P, 1999. 80.
241 Ibid. 80.

This factory is both self reliant and self generating, and does not necessarily require outside input to sustain itself. Although operating on new MySpace users' personal information, it has set itself up to be for the most part self efficient.

Due to its nature as a network, which depends on its own constant self-maintenance, the rapid growth in MySpace accelerates the process of materiality being replaced by information. As explored by Internet theorist Steven Shaviro,

> [f]irst, the very structure of the network works to perpetuate infinite need. A network has no goal outside itself and therefore no objective measure of satiety. It strives only to maintain itself. But self-maintenance is an endless task: a network's labour is never done. A network must make vast expenditures, simply in order to preserve, or re-establish, homeostasis.[242]

The perpetual need within MySpace is to collect user's personal information. As it has no goal outside itself, MySpace looks to satisfy the infinite need of users wishing to connect with others. Self-maintenance is key to the continuation of

242 Shaviro, Steven. Connected: What It Means to Live in a Networked Society. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2003. 11.

MySpace as a network, and the collection of personal information is the vast expenditure that is needed in order to preserve itself.

An examination of network theory will help illustrate the dynamics of MySpace as a social network. The makeup of a network according to theorist Darin Barney is:

> comprised of three main elements: nodes, ties and flows. A node is a distinct point connected to at least one other point, through it often simultaneously acts as a point of connection between two or more other points. A tie connects one node to another. Flows are what pass between and through nodes along ties.[243]

Within the MySpace setting, nodes can be interpreted as the individual users who comprise the social network. Individual users' pages act as distinct points which are then connected to other MySpace profiles, creating the online social network. Ties in the MySpace setting are the friendships, or connections that users make based on linked personal interests. Flows within the MySpace setting can be: textual (such as comments posted on user pages or emails exchanged), visual materials (like user pictures or video clips), and can also be the personal information that the user chooses to put on their page.

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243 Barney, Darin. The Network Society. Cambridge: Polity P, 2004. 26.

As the online setting of MySpace is founded on a social network, the emphasis shifts from being placed on individual users, to instead focus on connections made between users, and even further, can also include interest groups that people choose to affiliate themselves (bands, fan groups, cities, etc.). Thus the emphasis within the MySpace setting is on the ties, rather than nodes of the network, identity instead being constructed based on connections, or the illusion of affiliation. These ties have more emphasis than any flow between ties, as ties can be arbitrary or superficial, for example, one can add another user as a friend without knowing them or needing their permission. Moreover, in this process, ties become another form of information. What is important in this setting is the connection *as* information; any real-world materiality is replaced by this information connection. MySpace creates a self-regulating network where personal information is desired, which may also induce desire for personal information about others. The abstracted forms of personal identity are what enable the social network to succeed at such an accelerated rate.

It is MySpace's function as an accelerated social network which allows for such a rapid abstraction of identity to occur on the site. Moreover, MySpace is an example of how the internet has influenced the commodification of information. Beginning with the abstraction process, personal identity becomes de-temporalized, subject to lessened notions of time and space. The MySpace user has a lessened sense of historicity, which allows them to reconstruct identity

through pictorial representations. Due to a lack of context, this representation of personal identity then becomes a form of information. As personal identity is commodified as information, this abstracted form of personal identity becomes vulnerable to the control of Wark's vectoralist class. Though MySpace gives the illusion that users have complete control over constructing their online identities, the vectoralist class controls the process via the hidden structure and registration process of MySpace. As MySpace has no goal outside itself, and depends only on its own constant self-maintenance, MySpace works in accelerating the process of materiality being replaced by information. Connections made between users make up the basis of this social network, personal information and abstracted forms of identity are the information shared between users, and the commodity that the vectoralist class has the means to control.

In analyzing *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures*, a work by Difference Engine creator Charles Babbage, it would seem that Karl Marx had an eerily accurate view of the future of capitalism after the introduction of advanced communication technologies. While Babbage believed the introduction of, "machine intelligence was all that was needed to understand and model the rule of God,"[244] Marx was much more critical of the potential negative impacts of such mechanical technologies. In reading Babbage's work, Marx saw the introduction of so-called of 'machinofacture' technologies as, "means by which the

244 Dyer-Witheford, Nick. Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism. Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1999.3

bourgeoisie strove to subjugate a recalcitrant proletariat."[245] Rather than Babbage's idea of a "march of progress, or an approach to divine wisdom," Marx saw in Babbage's work, "a strategy of class war."[246] While Marx and Babbage would not live to see the introduction of technologies such as the personal computer, their respective positions on technology continue to resonate today.

Developing in Japan in the late 1960s to early 1970s, the idea of an "information society"[247] emerged in the writing of authors Tadeo Umesao, Kenichi Kohyama, Yujiro Hayashi, and Yoneji Masuda. Initially termed in Japanese as "johoka shakai or joho shakai," this idea of an 'information society' gave, "particular emphasis to computers' potential for changing industrial production methods by introducing unprecedented levels of automation and of integration between office, factory, and consumer."[248] Spurred on by the development of computing technologies, this idealistic conception of future societies had many of the same trademarks found in Babbage's work. Like Babbage, the Japanese writers envisioned

> an emergent society in which increased availability of information and free time resulted in declining materialism, improved self-

245 Dyer-Witheford, Nick. Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism. Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1999.3
246 Ibid. 3.
247 Ibid. 20.
248 Ibid. 20.

actualization, voluntary civic participation, enhanced global and ecological consciousness, and, ultimately, a revival of spirituality.

Border-lining a technologically induced utopia, the idea of such an 'informational society' quickly became a buzz-word in both academic and business circles. Subsequent business models embraced computer and telecommunication networks, and the shift from the mechanical to the digital was touted to be the next 'big thing' in business. It would be in this shift that "industry [was] succeeded by information,"[249] and as author Nick Dyer-Witheford has noted, this would be the borderline "dividing mechanical from digital machines, steel mills from silicon chips, railroad from communication networks."[250] As these new technologies emerged, 'information society' began to reorganize itself - its institutions, modes of production, and ways of viewing the world – all around the flow of data.

Within this new construction of society, information took on a more centralized role, shaping economic and social sectors around it
Such reorganization developed into what network theorist Jan van Dijk defined as "information intensity," where the stressed importance of information resulted in,

- an organization of society based on science, rationality and reflexivity;

249 Dyer-Witheford, Nick. Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism. Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1999. 21.
250 Ibid. 21.

- an economy with all values and sectors, even the agrarian and industrial sectors, increasingly characterized by information production;
- a labour market with the majority of the functions largely or completely based on tasks of information processing
- a culture dominated by media information products with their signs, symbols, and meanings.[251]

With this new emphasis, information now became the focus of both social and economic spheres, drastically changing classically held notions of commodity. Requiring minimal human labour to operate and maintain, the utilization of computer technologies changed how goods were both produced and consumed. Where physical commodity was the end-product of classical Marxism, this new digital "means of processing and producing information,"[252] became late capitalism's preferred mode of production. Reaching what Dyer-Witheford identified as a new "digitized level of automation,"[253] this mode of production that tried to obsolesce as much human interaction as possible, served as an "intensification of capital's perennial drive to eliminate its dependence on labour by transferring workers' knowledge into machines."[254] The effects of so called "high technologies," such as, "computers, telecommunications and genetic

8 Van Dijk, Jan. The Network Society - Second Edition. London: Sage, 2006..19.
252 Ibid. 20.
253 Dyer-Witheford, Nick. Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism. Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1999. 93.
254 Ibid. 92.

engineering,"[255] changed not only how we interact with one another, but how we do business.

The progression of this 'information society' has been achieved through the development of intricate social and media networks, causing the rise of what van Dijk calls a "network society."[256] Through the implementation of, "an infrastructure of social and media networks enabling its prime mode of organization at all levels (individual, group/organizational and societal)," the network has become the foundation on which 'information society' operates. Defining a network as "a collection of links between elements of a unit,"[257] the individuals connected within these networks are quickly becoming "the basic unit of the network society."[258] Acting as "new means of communication vital for the smooth flow of capital's circuit," such modern communication developments as, "fax, video, cable television, new broadcast technologies, and especially computer networks,"[259] allow users to easily interact and connect in the network structure. As with individual users, the implementation of such networks has greatly affected how business is conducted within the 'network society.' Forming what is seen as a new "economic organization next to traditional markets and

255 Dyer-Witheford, Nick. Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism. Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1999. 2.
256 Van Dijk, Jan. The Network Society - Second Edition. London: Sage, 2006..20.
257 Ibid. 24.
258 Ibid. 20.
259 Dyer-Witheford, Nick. Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism. Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1999. 93.

hierarchies (of governments and corporations),"[260] the shift to a networked society has reorganized traditional models of production and consumption.

In its latest incarnation, this new form of digital economics has been updated to include the growing importance of peer-generated content, created through the interaction of users in digital networks. Defined by authors Don Tappscott and Anthony D. Williams as "wikinomics,"[261] this new digital economy is based on user participation and collaboration, where,

> due to deep changes in technology, demographics, business, the economy and world, we are entering a new age where people participate in the economy like never before. This new participation has reached a tipping point where new forms of mass collaboration are changing how goods and services are invented, produced, marketed, and distributed on a global basis. This change represents far-reaching opportunities for every company and for every person who gets connected.[262]

Identifying how "the economics of production have changed significantly as we have moved from an industrial to an information-based economy," Tappscott and

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260 Van Dijk, Jan. The Network Society - Second Edition. London: Sage, 2006. 61.
261 Tapscott, Don, and Anthony D. Williams. Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything. New York: Portfolio, 2008.10.
262 Ibid. 10.

Williams see great opportunity for individual users within this new 'wikinomic' sphere. Historically, where the production of goods was normally limited to those employed by larger established companies, 'wikinomics', according to Tappscott and Williams, "liberates people to participate in innovation and wealth creation within every sector of the economy."[263]

Such liberation is created through the process of "peering," a new mode of production where "in its purest form, it is a way of producing goods and services that relies entirely on self-organization, egalitarian communities of individuals who come together voluntarily to produce a shared outcome."[264] While Tappscott and Williams acknowledge such an egalitarian approach is not the reality of the new peering model, the basis for the idea is still formed around meritocratic contributions from community members. For 'peering' to work best, three conditions are required,

1) The object of production is information or culture, which keeps the cost of participation low for contributors
2) Tasks can be chunked out into bite-size pieces that individuals can contribute in small increments and independently of other producers.

263 Tapscott, Don, and Anthony D. Williams. Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything. New York: Portfolio, 2008. 11.
264 Ibid. 67.

3) The costs of integrating those finished pieces into a finished end product, including the leadership and quality control mechanisms must be low. [265]

The result of such conditions fashions what Tappscott and Williams call "the prosumer,"[266] a user who not only consume content, but helps develop it in the process. Using the computer game *Second Life* as an example, they show how participants in this online 'world' create avatars and "socialize, entertain, and transact in a virtual environment fabricated almost entirely by its users."[267] Within these virtual activities, some users create businesses dealing in online 'real estate' or the sale of avatars themselves. Through the accumulation of the games online currency, the "Linden," players are able to earn 'real life' currency, with nearly "3100 residents [averaging] a net profit of $20,000 a year,"[268]

The proliferation of social networking sites such as MySpace has lead to numerous similar sites, all looking to capitalize on this business model. A recent development, Yuwie.com[269] is based around the idea of earning money through the generation of user content. As is noted in Yuwie's operating principle,

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265 Tapscott, Don, and Anthony D. Williams. Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything. New York: Portfolio, 2008. 70.
266 Ibid. 125.
267 Ibid. 125.
268 Ibid. 125.
269 "Yuwie: Where It Pays to Socialize." Yuwie. 3 May 2008 <http://www.yuwie.com>

"Yuwie pays [its] members based on the amount of activity they have, and based on the activity of their referrals."[270] A pun on MySpace's tagline "a place for friends," Yuwie proclaims to be the place "where it pays to socialize."[271]

In the Yuwie model payment is based around page hits and user referrals. A page hit is constituted by the amount of times user content is accessed by another viewer. As other social networking sites such as MySpace are gaining large sums of money through advertising while users do all the work, Yuwie strives to turn this idea on its head. While this idea looks to reward users for their efforts, creating a kind of equality between media and user the payment scheme is anything but equal. Based on a series of 10 levels defining the amount of content a user will input and the subsequent interest it generates, Yuwie users are paid accordingly. For example a user who refers 3 new users and has 3000 page hits earns a mere $0.15 for their efforts. To attain Yuwie's level 10 designation a user would need to refer 59,049 new users and generate an astonishing 59,049,000 page hits from their material. Such an astronomical amount of user interest would see the Yuwie user paid a sum of $8,857.35[272]. Even though the Yuwie model seems to reward a users participation within a social networking site, trying the balance the amount of revenue generated by advertisers at a users expense, one can see from the above model that user generated content is not equally compensated. The expectation that a user could

270 Ibid. <http://www.yuwie.com>
271 Ibid. <http://www.yuwie.com>
272 "Yuwie: Where It Pays to Socialize." Yuwie. 3 May 2008 <http://www.yuwie.com>

generate 59,049,000 page hits monthly seems absurd. Because the site proposes to reward it's users for creating more content, this inspires Yuwie members to go above and beyond what the average social networking user would produce. In creating this atmosphere, advertisers would seem to benefit more then the average user as they would potentially have a larger cross-section of users and more content to work with.

While the average MySpace user is not able to turn their online efforts into 'real life' money, we can see Tappscott and Williams' 'prosumer model', and the workings of the 'information economy' hard at work within the website. While the over-all structure of the MySpace site is maintained by owners Fox-Newscorp., a significant majority of the content within the site is user-generated. Capitalizing on the websites popularity, it was quickly realised that the,

> world's largest social networking site, MySpace has grown far past being merely "a place for friends," as its slogan states. With an estimated 110 million monthly active users, MySpace is undeniably a powerful tool for advertisers who seek reach and efficiency. [273]

273 Stelter, Brian. "From MySpace to YourSpace." New York Times 21 Jan. 2008. 23 Jan. 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/21/technology/21myspace.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=Myspace,%20data%20mining&st=cse&oref=slogin&oref=slogin>.

If not for scale of this newly created social network, MySpace would have little or no economic value. But how is it that owners Fox-NewsCorp are able to capitalize on what would seem to be a collection, albeit a massive one, of random information?

Within the MySpace setting, it is the user-generated personal content that is turned into a form of 'information commodity.' Contained within users' personal profiles, it is those textual and pictorial inclusions mentioned in the previous chapters that become forms of data to be commodified by the website. Accomplished through a process known as 'data mining', information on user profiles can be 'read' electronically by software created to extract personal details. Such software can, "automatically comb social networking sites, collecting and aggregating data based on keywords or other information like contact information, friends, and personal history."[274] In September 2007, MySpace began to 'mine' the profiles of its 110 million users in a project it called "interest-based targeting."[275] Developed by a team of 100 employees at Fox Interactive Media known as the "monetization technology group"[276], the project created computer algorithms to search MySpace pages. The purpose of such algorithms was to assign members "to one of 10 categories that represent their

274 Greenberg, Andy. "Mining MySpace." Forbes 2 Aug. 2007. 6 Aug. 2007 <http://www.forbes.com/2007/08/02/myspace-privacy-data_mining-tech-cx-ag-0802myspace.html?partner=email>.
275 Stone, Brad. "MySpace to Discuss Effort to Customize Ads." New York Times 18 Sept. 2007. 25 Sept. 2007 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/18/technology/18myspace.html?scp=2&sq=data+mining+%2B+social+networking&st=nyt>.
276 Ibid. Stone, Brad. "MySpace to Discuss Effort to Customize Ads." New York Times 18 Sept. 2007.

primary interest, like sports, fashion, finance, video games, autos and health."[277] Also noting information such as the group affiliation, who the user has chosen as online 'friends', their age and gender, and even which types of advertisements the user has selected in the past; such online algorithms created the ability for MySpace to specifically target advertisements tailored to the users' interests at an astonishing rate of accuracy. A user, for example, who indicated an interest in a particular style of music, such as 'pop', could then be targeted with an ad informing them of the latest release from a major record label. By creating such specified ads, it was estimated that a MySpace user was eighty percent more likely to click on the advertisement, and as such, MySpace's advertising revenue could go from $40 million a month, to a staggering figure of $70 million generated in ad revenues monthly.[278] Bringing the estimated value of MySpace to $800 million in the 2008 revenue period[279], there are clearly vast amounts of money to be made in target-specific ads.

While some users remained unaware of the process, there were those who felt that MySpace's 'mining' of their profiles constituted a form of infringement on their personal space. Since the 2005 acquirement of MySpace, Fox-Newscorp has been involved in a number of procedural changes to the website that have raised the ire of site users. In 2007, MySpace began to limit

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277 Ibid. Stone, Brad. "MySpace to Discuss Effort to Customize Ads." New York Times 18 Sept. 2007.
278 Stone, Brad. "MySpace to Discuss Effort to Customize Ads." New York Times 18 Sept. 2007.
279 Stelter, Brian. "From MySpace to YourSpace." New York Times 21 Jan. 2008. 23 Jan. 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/21/technology/21myspace.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=Myspace,%20data%20mining&st=cse&oref=slogin&oref=slogin>.

the ability of users to embed their chosen software choices for items such as music and video players. Under the guise of limiting "violations of its terms of service, like the spread of pornography or copyrighted material," the move was seen by MySpace users as an attempt to further restrict the ability to "sell items or advertise without authorization, or without entering into a direct partnership with the company."[280] Bringing the case to the forefront was public reaction of Internet starlet Tila Tequila, a 'singer' who's primary claim to stardom has been becoming the most 'befriended' person on MySpace with more than 1.7 million friends. Upon the release of her debut album in 2007, the singer who was born Tila Nguyen, added a music player called "Hooka"[281] to her profile which was promptly taken down by MySpace officials as it was created by a third-party developer not affiliated with the website. While the developers of the 'Hooka' software questioned whether such restrictions should necessitate the re-naming of the site to "FoxSpace," or "RupertSpace," referring to the News Corporation's chief, Rupert Murdoch,"[282] Ms. Nguyen posted a public outcry regarding online freedoms on her MySpace page. In an online post to her MySpace page, she wrote

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280 Stone, Brad. "MySpace Restrictions Upset Some Users." New York Times 20 Mar. 2007. 20 Apr. 2007 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/20/technology/20myspace.html?_r=1&scp=9&sq=MySpace+%2B+ads &st=nyt&oref=slogin>.

281 Ibid. Stone, Brad. "MySpace Restrictions Upset Some Users." New York Times 20 Mar. 2007.

282 Stone, Brad. "MySpace Restrictions Upset Some Users." New York Times 20 Mar. 2007. 20 Apr. 2007 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/20/technology/20myspace.html?_r=1&scp=9&sq=MySpace+%2B+ads &st=nyt&oref=slogin>.

> the reason why I am so bummed out about MySpace now is because recently they have been cutting down our freedom and taking away our rights slowly. MySpace will now only allow you to use 'MySpace' things...You guys used to be so cool [she wrote of MySpace]. Don't turn into a corporate evil monster.[283]

Cleary upset about the amount of control being exercised within her MySpace page, Ms. Nguyen's public outcry shed light on a growing concern about the amount of freedom that is available to a user within these social networking sites.

What is most interesting about this critique of 'freedom' within the online setting is the conception held by some users that MySpace acts as a form of 'personal space,' which would be void of any larger forms of control. The MySpace website, while being almost ubiquitous in its usage by the public is, after all, a proprietary space owned by a media giant. The role of the 'prosumer' in this setting is to enter in personal data in accordance with the larger structure of the website, and it would seem to make sense that these inclusions would be restricted to those categories and applications as dictated by the owner - in this case Fox-NewsCorp. While the public idealization of such a site might fall more in line with Babbage's hope for mechanical technologies or the Japanese conception of the 'information society,' MySpace is a proprietary space where the end goal is to serve as a means of production.

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283 Ibid. Stone, Brad. "MySpace Restrictions Upset Some Users." New York Times 20 Mar. 2007.

Conclusion:

From RL to Online, Subcultural Groups Gone Digital

As advancements in communication technologies push us further in the realm of the digital, the way in which we construct both personal and group identity will continue to change. No longer bound to the textual inclusions found within the MUDs of Sherry Turkle's work, the display capabilities of the modern Internet have significantly changed how we are able to represent ourselves online. Having been initially limited to text, the now ubiquitous setting of social networking sites, like MySpace.com, allows us to digitally reconstruct ourselves through a pastiche-like approach. Through the abstractive processes outlined by Guy Debord, the modern online subject is able to create a digital 'self' though a series of pictorial, textual, and multi-media (music, and video) based inclusions. In doing so, these inclusions become abstracted into 'spectacular' representations of self, where mere appearance becomes key.

While it has been shown that subcultural groups have long used clothing as a form of spectacular representation, the modern online subcultural participant can exist through stylistic affiliation alone. In presenting the processes that take place in the MySpace setting to abstract subcultural identity, it has been shown that the interconnected and instantaneous nature of the modern communicative

landscape negates the possibility of online subcultural groups in their traditional form.

By identifying an existing gap in the consideration of communications technologies in subcultural and post-subcultural studies, it is apparent that the role of social networking sites has not yet been fully considered. Turned into a form of information, online subcultural identity is now not only used for personal interaction, but is vulnerable to being co-opted by big business to create a more effective marketing tool. While the theories of Guy Debord and Mackenzie Wark have been separately employed to examine modern consumer culture, they have not yet been combined to examine the online setting of such 'sticky sites.' The sale of MySpace to media conglomerate News Corp has necessitated such an examination, where issues such as the image-based abstraction process and the new notions of information-based commodity are addressed.

The growing popularity of sites such as MySpace, and their shifting site of identity construction to that of an online setting, add yet another layer to the already broad spectrum of cultural / communication studies. As subcultural groups transition from so-called RL, or real life, to the online setting, we stand at an important time where actualized affiliation to a social group is in danger of being replaced with mere appearance. As notions of commodity have shifted from 'having' to 'appearing', an examination of the networked nature of MySpace is necessary, unless we are to be lost in a world of spectacular image-based commodity.

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