

# **The Diffusion of Style: A Qualitative Investigation of Australian Hip Hop Culture**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper proposes a conceptual model of the evolving roles of style and brands, and the diffusion of subcultural styles based on a qualitative investigation of Australian Hip Hop culture. Drawing on subcultural theory and diffusion research, the author uses ethnographic and interview data to provide a detailed explanation of the evolving roles style and brands play within the Australian Hip Hop culture, and examines the diffusion of subcultural style.*

Keywords: Brands, Subculture, Hip Hop, Youth, Style, Fashion, Diffusion, and Ethnography

## **Introduction**

Many consumer behaviour studies have investigated diffusion theory, however, very little research has applied diffusion theory to subcultural style. Furthermore, the roles style and brands play as individuals evolve from subcultural non-members, to soft-core members, and finally to hard-core members, have yet to receive any academic attention. A greater understanding of this area is important as the demographic most heavily influenced by subcultural style, those aged between 14 and 28, spent an estimated A\$12.2 billion on clothing, in Australia alone, in 2002 (Lifelounge 2003). Furthermore, the culture under investigation, Hip Hop, is pervading youth culture throughout the world and has been found to shape brand awareness and preference as well as how and why brands are consumed (Morris, 2003). Hence, this study, part of a larger investigation examining the symbolic consumption of subcultures, draws on subcultural theory and diffusion research, combined with ethnographic and interview data to provide a detailed explanation of the evolving roles style and brands play within subcultures, and to examine the diffusion of subcultural style.

## **Methodology**

Any researcher attempting an ethnographic investigation of the diffusion of subcultural style must enter the subcultural milieu prior to the beginning of the diffusion process. To enter the subculture once the diffusion process has begun weakens the validity of the ethnographic process as the researcher does not obtain the 'complete' lived experience and can only hear about pre-diffusion days second-hand and in retrospect from other subcultural members. This poses a serious problem for the ethnographic researcher, as gaining subcultural membership provides no guarantee that the subcultural style will diffuse anytime in the near future (if at all). For this reason, no ethnographic research to date has investigated the diffusion of subcultural style (Rogers, 1995). Indeed, an examination of the diffusion of subcultural style was not the researcher's initial research objective.

The initial objective was to embark on an ethnographic project utilising participant observation to investigate the evolving roles style and brands play within the Australian Hip Hop culture. Becoming a member of a subculture generally means entering at the bottom of

the status hierarchy and undergoing a process of socialisation. Hence, the nature of the ethnographic process was evolving which allowed the researcher to interact with different elements of the subculture and experience the evolving roles of style and brands, as an insider. Members of the culture interacting with the researcher were made aware of his researcher status, however, it was not possible, nor desirable, to inform all those members observed. In the early months of the research, a noticeable shift in the popularity of Australian Hip Hop occurred. During participant observation, the researcher discovered that much discussion revolved around this increased popularity. Analysis of the earliest interview transcripts found this theme to continually reoccur. The Australian Hip Hop culture was growing in size, and the music and style that embody it, were growing at even faster rate (Pollard, 2003). Seizing on an opportunity not initially identified as a research objective, the researcher continued to analyse and examine the trend over the two-year period of the ethnographic data collection, and a series of in-depth interviews.

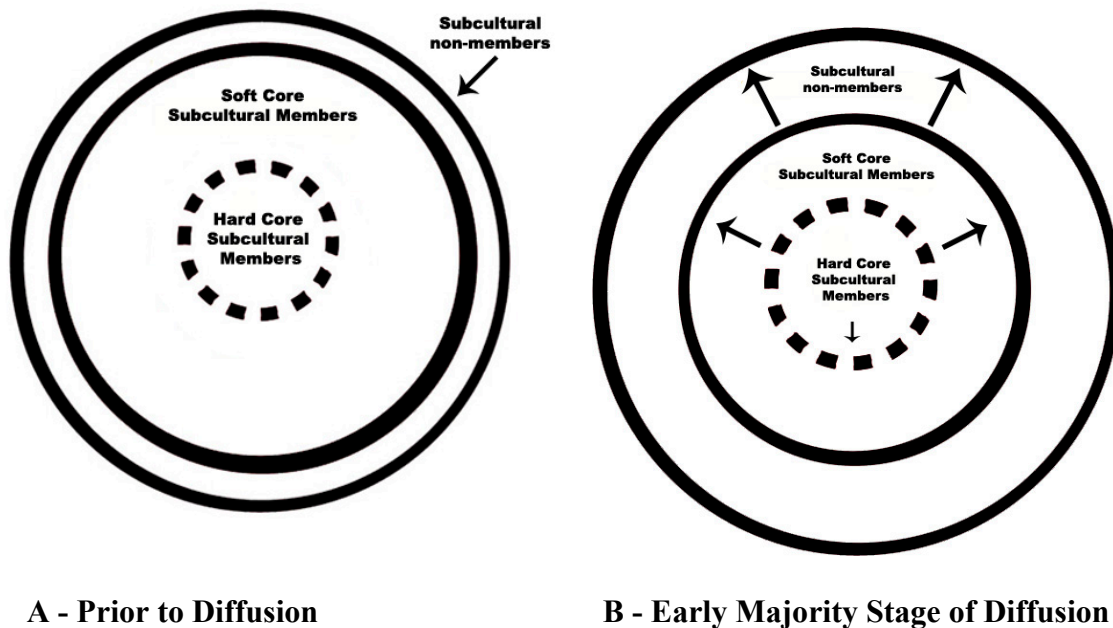
Access to the interviewees was gained through the ethnographic process. The researcher's progress through the subculture provided him with an insider's perspective of the cultural phenomenon and a greater ability to interpret the underlying messages behind the interviewees' comments as the ethnography progressed. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with hard-core and soft-core members of the Australian Hip Hop culture. The interviews were open-ended in nature and provided the researcher with detailed narratives detailing the interviewees' relationship between the culture and their choice of style and brands. This technique was chosen as it is better suited to the development of conceptual models and when cultural categories are under investigation (McCracken 1988; Wells 1993).

### **The Evolving Roles of Style and Brands**

Schouten and McAlexander (1995) recognised that subcultures have both an inner circle of hard-core members whose devotion and commitment to the groups' values is both full time and enduring, and an outer circle of soft-core members whose commitment to and understanding of the values is less complete. These hard-core members function as arbiters of meaning and the less committed members of the group turn to them for guidance. However, according to Thornton (1995), it is more than just a full time commitment to the groups' values that makes a member 'hard core'. He or she must also be high in subcultural capital. Subcultural capital is a knowledge and understanding of the cultures values, attitudes, history and activities and is often objectified in the display of material belongings such as wearing the 'right' style and brands.

As illustrated in Figure 1, as the motives for consuming subcultural style and brands differs substantially between subcultural members and non-members, each segment is perceived as a distinctly separate group. Subcultural non-members who purchase subcultural style and brands are what Polhemus (1996) describes as 'style surfers'. Style surfers move quickly and freely from one style to another with playfulness and pleasure. They do not have to worry about contradictions between their selected subcultural identities, for they have no ideological commitment. For the style surfer, there is merely a stylistic game to be played which explains inconsistencies found in the product-image self-image congruency hypothesis in the context of fashion (Sirgy 1982). Subcultural members, on the other hand, are more likely to achieve a product-image self-image congruency as they are committed to the subcultural ideology.

**Figure 1 – The Market for Subcultural Style and Brands**



As indicated by the dotted lines in figure 1, the soft-core and hard-core segments are viewed as a continuum, where, members at the outer ring, are aspiring to join the subculture, through to the centre, where members' commitment to the cultures' values and practises are full time and enduring. The results obtained from the ethnographic and interview analyses suggest that those aspiring members at the outer ring of the soft-core segment consumed brands that they perceived to be symbolic of Hip Hop. This was seen as necessary as these individuals' were yet to obtain the subcultural capital required to obtain credibility as members without them. Because their subcultural capital was low, this group, including the researcher during the early months, relied heavily on images portrayed in mainstream media and advertising, and shopped predominantly in highly commercial stores. Hence the brands they consumed were notably commercialised such as Adidas, Nike, and Ecko. This technique of gaining access to subcultural members via symbolic consumption is highlighted by Kab, a hard-core interviewee. In the following extract, Kab indicates that aspiring members are most likely to buy highly commercial Hip Hop brands, what he identifies as "the latest crap."

*KAB: The first thing people would probably do if they wanted to access it would be to I suppose dress similarly you know, with those [Australian Hip Hop] brands, or even other brands that are the latest crap or whatever, and go to the gigs and hang out and hopefully talk to people.*

Once individuals begin to understand the governing ethos of the subculture, they achieve soft-core membership status. A dominant value within the Australian Hip Hop culture is the belief that the subculture is significantly different to the American Hip Hop culture, and that it should be supported in its own right. In order to express this belief, and to substantiate this newly acquired subcultural capital to their peers, soft-core members (including the researcher), begin to shop in Australian Hip Hop stores that are considered underground, since subcultural non-members are not aware of their existence. They also consume more Australian Hip Hop brands, such as Materialism, OK 101, One Leg, and Blank. These brands

act as signs alerting other members of membership and subcultural capital. Furthermore, these brands were used to 'represent' Australian Hip Hop culture.

Only those members with an abundance of subcultural capital are perceived to have achieved hard-core membership status. These individuals' skills at one of Hip Hop's four elements (MCing, breakdancing, graffiti art, or DJing) and commitment to the values of the culture transcend the need to consume brands in order to be perceived as Hip Hop. However, in general, these individuals did consume brands that 'represent' (Hip Hop), as these brands are an expression of their own self-identity. As such, many hard-core members continue to support Australian Hip Hop, and consume predominantly Australian Hip Hop brands. Other members demonstrate their knowledge of the culture's roots and consume brands associated with New York Hip Hop of the late 70's and early 80's, while others still prefer to highlight their 'Australianness' by consuming non-Hip Hop brands more iconic of Australia. For example, Jimmy C, another hard-core interviewee, is no longer using style and brands to express a cultural identity, but to express his individual identity, an identity that is now shaping the future of Australian Hip Hop culture and style. Jimmy C, explains the new role style and brands play in his life, as follows:

*JIMMY C: Then, back then, it's like looking for an identity. Now it's like I make the identity... you know you want to stand on your own, sort of thing. And you want to be seen to be original, and different and not part of the herd. Even though you are part of the whole culture, you still want to be seen to have contributed, made an individual contribution to that.*

### **The Diffusion of Subcultural Style**

Rogers (1995) defines an innovation "as an idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or another unit of adoption" (Rogers 1995 p, XVII). For subcultural non-members, Hip Hop style would be perceived as innovative as they have never considered wearing it before. Applying Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovations to subcultural style, we would expect the first 2.5% of the subcultural members to adopt a new style to be innovators, content to tolerate the social embarrassment associated with not conforming to a 'mainstream' style of dress. These individuals are cosmopolitan in outlook and use other innovators rather than local peers as a reference group. The ethnographic and interview data confirms this view. However, as indicated in Figure 1, a percentage of the market for Hip Hop style and brands is always subcultural non-members. These innovators are style surfers and play a very limited role in the diffusion process. Hence, at the 'innovators' stage in the diffusion process the market for subcultural style and brands is relatively stable, as was highlighted in Figure 1-A.

As previously stated, the popularity of Australian Hip Hop has grown considerably during the ethnographic research. Some of the interest may have been sparked by the success of white American rapper Eminem, and his starring role in the film 8-mile. However, most subcultural members agree that the rise of Australian Hip Hop has been predominantly initiated by some of the subculture's own hard-core members, in particular, the musicians. These musicians (the MC's and the DJ's) are acting as opinion leaders influencing the diffusion of subcultural style and brands amongst both members and non-members in the early adopters stage. A key element in the Frank Bass (1969) forecasting model is that adoptions due to external influence occur early on, which is evident in the subculture under examination (Mahajan et al. 1990).

If enough early adopters adopt the subcultural style, the style reaches a critical mass, the point at which enough individuals have adopted the style so that the style's further rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining. This is what Malcolm Gladwell defines as the 'tipping point' (Gladwell 2002). Research suggests that further adoption after the tipping point is self-sustaining because at this point norms are established for new patterns of behaviour. Those who have a lower threshold and adopt earlier seek differentiation, while those who join later imitate the earlier adopters to avoid the negative consequences involved with not following group norms. This is consistent with the view that individuals look to referent others as a basis for establishing the validity of their actions and that adoption behaviour is encouraged when a new product is perceived to be compatible with existing social norms and expectations. The evidence from this study supports social learning theory in that at the 'early adopters' stage in the diffusion process individuals learn from each other by means of social modelling (Bandura 1977). As imitation threatens the integrity of the differentiating symbols, the earlier adopters maintain their social distance through subsequent style surfing, and hence, the process of imitation and differentiation results in an ongoing cycle of change (Fisher and Price 1992). Figure 1-B illustrates the market for subcultural style at the early majority stage of diffusion. Again, the non-subcultural members are seen as 'on the outer' from the perspective of those who have gained membership to the subculture. However, the subcultural non-members are now the largest consumers of the style and brands. This segment is concerned with keeping up with fashion and meeting group norms. The soft-core members on the other hand are more concerned about wearing brands and subcultural style that authentically 'represents' Hip Hop.

Gottdiener (1985) recognised that the extension of subcultural style beyond the outer circle of 'soft core' members can have a fatal corrupting influence on the subculture itself. This was illustrated in a study of 'new bikers' conducted by Schouten and McAlexander (1995), who found that part of the psychic benefit of the biker subculture was the distinction of being part of a marginal group. As the popularity of the Harley Davidson grew, the lines of marginality began to blur and some of the distinctiveness of the biker subculture was lost. Hence, the marketers of Harley Davidson were forced to manage the conflicting interests of two disparate groups: the traditional bikers who give the product mystique, and the new bikers who give the company its profits. As indicated in the following extract, Jenno, a soft-core member explains how the diffusion of the Hip Hop and Surf cultures has diluted the values of the brands Ecko and Billabong respectively.

*JENNO: [To me] Ecko's just another brand name, I don't really think or feel anything, probably the same as I saw someone wearing a Billabong top or something like that. I don't really connect, make a connection between Ecko and Hip Hop or Ecko and a certain style or genre, for me it's just another type of clothing.*

*DA: Do you make a connection between Billabong and surfing?*

*JENNO: Not really, not now, because Billabong, it's gone beyond just being say a surfing brand, it's more a clothing brand as such.*

Subcultural styles are cyclical phenomena. A single fashion cycle usually lasts several years, and some times as long as five to ten (Sproles 1981). Two years into the research, Hip Hop style in Australia is still in the early majority stage of the diffusion process. While marketers are expected to prolong the growth of subcultural style and brands by managing the disparate interests of subcultural members and non-members, the diffusion process will eventually peak and enter the late majority stage, and the laggards' stage of the diffusion cycle. However, the

interview analysis suggests that subcultural members expect the subculture will remain, and with it, a relatively stable number of subcultural non-members will continue to 'surf the style', the new innovators. Then, of course, the process is free to begin all over again.

### **Conclusion**

Through the development of a conceptual model, this study has highlighted the evolving roles of style and brands in subcultures. The implications are that it is possible for a marketer who understands the structure and ethos of a subculture to take an active role in socialising new members and cultivating the commitment of current ones. Furthermore, as change agents, marketers could identify hard-core members who have celebrity appeal to non-subcultural members and play an active role in the diffusion of subcultural style and brands. These hard-core members are seen as authentic as they originate from within the subculture and hence can be utilised as convincing opinion leaders.

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