

DISCLAIMER:

This document does not meet the
current format guidelines of
the Graduate School at
The University of Texas at Austin.

It has been published for
informational use only.

Copyright

by

Carter Kenneth Delloro

2012

**The Report Committee for Carter Kenneth Delloro
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**Unity Through Uniqueness:
The Subcultural Capital of Music Blogs**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Madhavi Mallapragada

Joseph D. Straubhaar

**Unity Through Uniqueness:
The Subcultural Capital of Music Blogs**

by

Carter Kenneth Delloro, B.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2012

Dedication

This report is for my parents, who have supported me tirelessly throughout my educational experience. They are also the ones who instilled in me an intense appreciation for music and the performing arts. For all of that, I am eternally grateful. Without them, this report would not exist. Additionally, this report is dedicated to the thousands of dedicated music fans who pour their lives into their music blogs for little or no pay. Theirs is a labor of love and it continues to inspire me.

Abstract

Unity Through Uniqueness: The Subcultural Capital of Music Blogs

Carter Kenneth Delloro, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisor: Madhavi Mallapragada

Recent scholarship on subcultural theory has cultivated an idea of subcultural capital around common signifiers. Points of departure within subcultures have been seen as deviations or potential threats to subcultural cohesion. In this report, I use a mixed-method approach to examine the way subcultural capital is created within the digital subculture of music blogs. Focusing on North American independent rock music blogs, I use a qualitative approach to examine their aesthetic choices, and descriptive analysis informed by quantitative techniques to examine content decisions. Through these methods, I demonstrate that in this particular subculture, member uniqueness is not a factor to be glossed over or explained away. It is not a threat to subcultural unity. Rather, for this subculture at least, member uniqueness is a necessary condition for participation within the subculture. At different locations within their websites, music blogs utilize signifiers that both unite them with, and distinguish them from, others in the subculture.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Methodology	5
Literature Review	12
Chapter 1: Blog Style - Aesthetics and Layout.....	19
Chapter 2: Blog Content	35
Conclusion	46
Bibliography	49

INTRODUCTION

At first, it was just friends asking for music recommendations. Their insistence led me to express my thoughts and opinions on the music I sought out via a page on WordPress, “the largest self-hosted blogging tool in the world,” according to their “About WordPress” page. The platform is used by millions of people worldwide to blog about any subject of their choice. For me, it enabled my first foray into the world of music blogs. Since then, I have started a semi-professional music blog read by thousands of people every month (*Ovrl.com*) and have networked with music bloggers from around the United States. I have had to make choices about what exactly my site should look like, and what kinds of artists it should feature. As I have gotten more intertwined with this field, though, I have begun to wonder: What exactly *is* a music blog?

I would argue that music blogs are just a digital form of the subcultures that Hebdige began defining in the late 1970s. There are the common stylistic markers, the counterhegemonic discourses, and the constant dispute over the very meaning of the group itself that Dick Hebdige identified as major elements of subcultural interaction (17-18). One of the critical elements of my research, then, is to establish that music blogs can be viewed through the lens of subcultural theory, and that this will help us understand not only that group of websites and its content, but also tweak our current perspectives on subcultures.

Currently there are only a few scholars who have focused explicitly on music blogs. They address the notion of authenticity, how sites cultivate it through their content choices, and how that builds credibility amongst the peers within the subculture. Each

scholar notes that covering and promoting marginal artists is a critical element to establishing the required capital for membership within the subculture (Wodtke 84; Jetto 71-72). Yet there is a competing pressure to be influential within the subculture, measured in one aspect by garnering large readerships, and only covering marginal artists will not drive much traffic to the site (Jetto 71). Thus, content is not determined independently, but is rather influenced by the parameters of the subculture. Here it is important to utilize subcultural theory in order to fully address the presentation of music blogs.

Subcultural theory, as articulated by Hebdige and later Thornton, suggests that subcultures have their own capital that can often be enacted by shared experiences or markers. Hebdige's classic example of this is the British punks' recontextualization of the safety pin and other non-traditional clothing items in the late 1970s (107). It was an easy way for members to identify one another, and for individuals to proclaim their subcultural membership to outsiders. Thus, subcultural capital is built around commonalities. However, Larissa Wodtke, in her study on mp3 blogs, is the only author I've encountered to allude to the idea that capital can be built around differences (Wodtke 84), and she does so only in passing. I see these websites augmenting the generally accepted notions of subcultural capital by finding commonality through difference, and unity through uniqueness. Whereas Wodtke sees this characteristic as threatening the subcultural status of the blogs that she studies by diluting their subcultural unity, I think it is the defining characteristic of their subcultural capital.

The original research question, “What is a music blog?,” can then be re-imagined as two more specific questions: Why are music blogs a subculture unto themselves and what constitutes subcultural capital within the music blogosphere? Answering these questions will surely encompass some of the shared markers between blogs in both appearance and content, but my argument suggests that there will be much beyond those markers to explore. This refinement also leads to further questions. How would this subculture define itself in opposition to the hegemonic discourse of broader society, if indeed it can be considered counterhegemonic at all? Which hegemonic discourses would it oppose? What role do particular embedded media forms play in the construction of site identity? What about a blog’s format? As we examine the unifying features of the subculture, I will also highlight the unique elements that blogs can embrace in order to improve their capital through difference. For many North American music blogs, this may be as simple as covering artists that others in the subculture have yet to address. Some blogs, though, have their unique aspects built into the philosophies of the sites, whether it is a focus on a geographic region that others are ignoring, like *Austin Town Hall*, or a genre that finds less attention on most music blogs, like *Pigeons & Planes* for example. Either way, I argue that this uniqueness is a necessary condition for inclusion within the subculture.

It is critical at the outset of this project to define the term “blogs,” since they are the subjects of all of the research within. Of course, arriving at a definition is not a simple task. Kathy Gill has put forth seven characteristics that comprise blogs: 1) Reverse chronological format; 2) Regular, date-stamped entries; 3) Links to related news articles

and other items within each entry; 4) Archived entries; 5) Links to related blogs (now routinely manifested as a blogroll); 6) RSS or XML feed; and 7) Passion (2). This definition will be important to recall as the exploration of blogs goes deeper, because certain sites that may be casually referred to as “blogs” don’t actually fit into this definition. Some may have one or even multiple characteristics of blogs, but will be lacking some critical element (e.g., reverse chronological layout) that prevents them from being considered as a true blog, by Gill’s definition. Still, there are many different formats, contents, layouts, and other attributes that can vary dramatically amongst blogs.

As a media form, blogs came into existence in the late 1990s, but were largely relegated to the niche of web design and technology. By 2001, though, their subject matter had expanded dramatically. After 9/11, the subgenre of political blogs exploded in prominence and influence (Gill 3), while a generally wider array of subjects was covered. The earliest music-oriented websites came across less similarly to the blogs we know today, and were more akin to digital zines – or, low-budget, independently produced magazines that addressed music subcultures. *Pitchfork*, *Tiny Mix Tapes* and *Stereogum* are all extant examples of these early online spaces – forming in 1996, 2001 and 2002, respectively – that brought music writing into the digital realm without conforming to what we would now recognize specifically as blogs. By the end of 2002, though, the first music blogs as we know them today were published, including *Flux Blog* (which claims to be the very first “mp3 blog,” or blog which offers mp3s to stream or download in its entries) and *Chrome Waves*.

Over the next several years, more and more music blogs were established.

By 2005, Anthony Volodkin had founded the *Hype Machine* – a music blog aggregator in the vein of *Technorati* that compiles posts from hundreds of different sites across the Web. Today, a second aggregator, *Elbo.ws*, is also quite successful at pointing users toward blogs that may be covering an artist in which they are interested, or in just getting the general pulse of much-discussed artists, songs or videos at any given moment in time. Many of these blogs are individually influential, and the music blogosphere as an aggregated whole draws millions of eyes. *Hype Machine* garners nearly two million hits per month, while several other blogs, such as *Pretty Much Amazing*, *Aquarium Drunkard*, *Gorilla Vs. Bear*, and *Pigeons & Planes* all see around or over 150,000 visitors every month.

It is important to explore the music blogosphere at this time, because it is beginning to influence the mainstream music media (like *Rolling Stone*). Most non-pop acts (such as currently commercially successful bands like Phoenix, MGMT, Vampire Weekend, and others) are being covered by the blogosphere far before they are picked up by mainstream publications. Understanding this emergent media form is critical due to the impact it is having on the music industry, and the listening and consuming experiences of that industry's vast fan base, not to mention the way it defines the experiences of the hundreds of thousands of music blog readers across the world.

METHODOLOGY

In order to address these questions, I have split my research into two distinct parts. The first part will utilize an examination of the layout, aesthetics and content of

four specific music blogs – *Austin Town Hall*, *Pigeons & Planes*, *Pretty Much Amazing*, and *I Guess I'm Floating* – as the basis for further exploration of music blog contents and styles. The second part will broaden to include 24 different music blogs in an in-depth look at one particular feature of music blogs and how that reflects the same principles of balancing the shared with the unique. For my research, I will be looking specifically at music blogs based in the United States, which is not as simple as it may seem, since most music blogs do not appear to adhere to any specific geographic boundaries. Most North American music blogs cover music from a variety of countries including but not limited to their own (usually Australia, the United Kingdom, and other parts of Europe), many non-North American music blogs cover copious amounts of music from the US and Canada, and the geographic origins of many blogs and bloggers are unclear. However, the blogs on which I will focus my research are all based in the US, so cross-cultural identity issues will be minimized.

Additionally, there is the question of the kind of music being covered on these websites. Though blogs might be devoted to country, rap, or any of a multitude of other genres, the bulk of my experience has been with rock music, so that will be the focus of my research in this thesis. However, blogs often don't limit themselves to a specific genre and thus may cover hip-hop, folk, or electronic musicians even if most of their content is centered on rock artists. Again, then, the majority of my research will be confined to this genre, but there will also be moments that intentionally blur this boundary.

In the first section of my research, I will be examining four music blogs. I will not use these as individual case studies, but they will be the sources for many of the

observations I make and theories I explore about music blogs in general. The blogs I have chosen to examine are *pigeonsandplanes.com* (*P&P*), *iguessimfloating.com* (*IGIF*), *prettymuchamazing.com* (*PMA*), and *austintownhall.com* (*ATH*). *PMA* and *P&P* are the higher-profile music blogs by any metric. On Twitter, *PMA* has over 11,000 followers, *P&P* has over 8,000, *IGIF* has over 4,000 and *ATH* has over 3,000. On Facebook, *PMA* has nearly 21,000 likes, *P&P* has over 7,000 likes, *IGIF* has over 5,000, and *ATH* has around 350. And according to *trafficestimate.com*, *PMA* had 385,800 visits in March 2012, followed by *P&P* with 313,100, and *ATH* with 25,866. Hard numbers were not available for *IGIF*, but it ranks somewhere in the vast gulf between *P&P* and *ATH*, according to *alexa.com*. Compared to dozens of other music blogs, *P&P* and *PMA* are two of the only ones whose readership has risen over the last year. Collectively, these numbers show the reach of the music blogosphere – thousands of people from around the globe are reading these blogs every month. However, they also provide perspective when compared with the millions of hits per month that major music sites like *rollingstone.com* might attract. These sites are by no means members of the mainstream. Additionally, the music blogging subculture can range from sites that measure readership in the hundreds of thousands to those whose readership is in the tens of thousands, and probably even smaller than that.

These blogs collectively have many similarities and differences, but each serves a different function in the context of this research project. For example, *I Guess I'm Floating* is fairly typical of a music blog with a modest readership (extrapolating here from their social media numbers, since hard data on their actual hits per month is

unavailable at this time). There is very little to distinguish it from others of its kind aside from the particulars of the content choices the editors and writers make, and it will thus provide a satisfactory space within which to explore what it means to be a music blog. *IGIF* is a blog begun by two Kentuckians, Nathaniel Gravely and Conner McGlynn, one or both of whom are now based in New York City. It has entries displayed in reverse chronological order, leaves spaces for comments from readers, and focuses on artists not receiving as much attention from mainstream – or hegemonic – press outlets, among other characteristics. Additionally, they have been recognized by several media outlets beyond the blogosphere for their excellence in music blogging, with coverage in the *New York Daily News* and the *BBC*, as well as a Weblog Award in 2006 for Best Music Blog with nominations in several subsequent years. An exploration of *I Guess I'm Floating* will help illuminate these and many other standard features of music blogs.

The remaining three blogs all offer variations on the archetypal North American independent rock music blog, as constructed by *I Guess I'm Floating* and so many other sites. *Pigeons & Planes*, for example, explicitly covers hip-hop music in addition to independent rock, and is one of the only blogs (and certainly the most prominent) to provide the same depth of content in the hip-hop genre as it does in the rock genre. It would be easy to assume radically different audiences would be interested in each area, but *P&P* disregards that idea in favor of broadening their coverage beyond what other music blogs might, and they have been rewarded with a relatively large readership. The seemingly disparate subject matter will allow me to explore subcultural identity in terms of content decisions. *Pretty Much Amazing* writes about artists who are signed to

independent labels, or not signed at all, but they also devote a lot of webspace to artists who are signed to major labels, like Adele or Foster the People. *Austin Town Hall*, unlike the others in this small group of blogs, is grounded in a physical (offline) space. Most music blogs make no mention of where their contributors and editors are located; they exist almost entirely in digital spheres and could be written anywhere. *Austin Town Hall* is different, however. The blog displays its locality – Austin, Texas – in its very name, and the authors cover artists from Austin that get attention from few other blogs. *ATH* enacts its geography in a distinct way when compared to other members of the music blogging subculture.

For the second part of the research, I had to expand my sample size. Since it was my goal to use year-end best-of lists to examine a method that blogs employ of demonstrating their uniqueness in order to build subcultural capital, I wanted to look at a large number of sites which were generally considered members of the subculture. The most exhaustive method of determining this would require investigating the blogrolls of every music blog, the space on the site where the blogger links to other blogs they feel would be of interest to their readers, and determine which blogs were most often linked to. However, another method presented itself when independent rock band The Pass released the music video for their song “Vultures” on August 31, 2010. The video was directed by Zach Hart, the blogger behind *We Listen For You*, a Louisville-based music blog, and in it he and the band included visual allusions to the names of 39 different music blogs, e-zines and aggregators. For example, the video begins with a close-up of someone dropping a needle onto a record on a turntable, which references to the music

blog *The Needle Drop*. Later in the video, the record on the turntable reappears as someone places a glass of vodka next to it, signifying the music blog *Vinyl and Vodka*. It includes scene leaders like e-zine *Pitchfork* and blog aggregator *Hype Machine*, both of which average multiple millions of hits per month, right alongside lower-profile music blogs like *Everybody Taste* and *Each Note Secure*, which have around 0.5% of that readership. It is interesting to note that while *Pretty Much Amazing* and *Pigeons & Planes* were featured in this video, *I Guess I'm Floating* and *Austin Town Hall* were not. Having been directed by a member of this subculture, this video seemed like a good place from which to draw members of the music blogosphere with significant subcultural capital for my study of uniqueness displayed in year-end lists.

Overall, I will be utilizing a mixed-method approach with the research in this paper. For the first phase of research, I will use qualitative techniques to explore the layout and aesthetics of the blogs under study. However, in the second phase of research, I will be employing more quantitative methods. These will fall short of statistical analysis, but a quantitative approach will inform the descriptive analysis in which I will engage. I feel that this mixed-method approach will provide a more complete picture of the music blogosphere. It is also important to note that my findings here will not be generalizable. Though I have a healthy number of blogs for the more in-depth section, and the 24 blogs for the more quantitative section should be enough from which to draw greater conclusions, my time frame for each study is limited. The broad year-end list study was only conducted for the year 2009, because a portion of the blogs have since ceased production in one way or another. Because of the ephemeral nature of many

members of the subculture, a longitudinal study is difficult to conduct, despite its necessity for generalizability. In the more qualitative study I conducted with the smaller sample size, the content I examine is drawn from the beginning of 2012 so it must be thought of as a glimpse at a moment in time. Together, these studies will suggest directions for further research, but not be able to come to any further conclusions about that particular subculture, or subcultures in general.

As I approach the data I have collected and contextualize it within the framework of research done in this area, my main methodological approach will be a combination of textual and discursive analysis. Textual analysis emphasizes close readings of the texts at hand, and in the case of this research that could mean a variety of approaches. Most obviously, the “text” would be the content of entries made onto any of my case study blogs. The artists they choose to cover are significant and telling in the construction of subcultural capital. However, the text extends beyond the literal words on the page to include the entirety of the website. What kinds of decisions have the authors of the blog made with regards to their site’s presentation? Are there entries or types of entries that they are displaying more prominently than others? What types of media do they include in their entries on different artists? How do these textual decisions reflect the values of the site? Close textual analysis answers many of these questions and lends greater insight to how the blogs present themselves.

In addition to textual analysis, I will also employ the closely related strategy of discourse analysis, a wide-ranging approach that can draw from any of a number of theoretical backgrounds. I will focus on the social theory aspect of discursive analysis –

stemming from the works of Foucault and Bourdieu, to name but a few – in order to look at the ideologies and power structures that inform the discourse available on the sites. I hope to explore ‘the discursive economy,’ as Foucault explains it (Foucault 74), around music blogs. In other words, I will be exploring how the discourses on different sites relate to one another, and perhaps to more hegemonic discourses as well (Ifversen 65-66). This approach will uncover the structures of the music blogging subculture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since this paper examines the role of subculture in understanding music blogs, it will draw most heavily from subcultural theory. Dick Hebdige’s seminal work on subcultures has led us to associate them with shocking opposition to a staid or conservative mainstream. As alluded to earlier, he famously illustrated his concept of subculture with the example of the punk movement in Britain in the mid- to late-1970s and its visual signifiers of repurposed safety pins and chains as “...a symbolic violation of the social order” (Hebdige 19). While this remains a vital example of the connection between the style and politics of a subculture, the essence of Hebdige’s definition simply points to “refusal” (4) and a “struggle between different discourses” (17). By this standard, music blogs can be viewed as the digital incarnation of the subculture long formed by the alternative musical press. Music blogs deny the dominant discourse of our society as it pertains to music, and attempt to construct an alternative reading via their structure and content. The ultimate goal of this struggle is immaterial; the struggle itself

is what defines them as a subculture distinct from the hegemonic forces within the music industry.

Michael Ayers illustrates how this concept might apply to music blogs in his 2006 essay, “The Cyberactivism of a Dangermouse.” In it, Ayers examines how DJ Dangermouse’s legally questionable *Grey Album* allowed blogs to become spaces of active resistance against hegemonic forces within the music industry. The incident refers to when DJ Dangermouse was served with a cease and desist order to remove his album, and hundreds of music blogs participated in “Grey Tuesday,” all offering the album for free download on the same day. It was an act of resistance that highlighted the subversive potential of the music blogosphere – a potential that is realized almost daily when copyrighted MP3s are distributed for digital download, a common practice in the field. Chris Atton indirectly adds to this perspective in his 2004 study of alternative media and the Internet. While not directly addressing music blogs, Atton does address digital streaming of music – which he sees as an explicitly political, anti-copyright act – on sites, suggesting, “...the desire to have one’s music heard is greater than the desire for commercial success” (106). Additionally, Atton’s work encompasses fan sites and e-zines, which are arguably cousins to music blogs, and discusses their ability to “strengthen democratic culture” (5). He ultimately suggests that sites like music blogs are capable of the same kind of resistance as more explicitly political sites; they simply resist the cultural hegemony of more mainstream press outlets.

Hebdige’s vision of subcultures is also evident when considering music blogs’ potential as sites for a struggle of an enactment of fandom that rejects the passivity of

most consumers. It is a community of passionate fans who insist on actively negotiating their experience. Hebdige may focus his definition on the actions of repossessing dominant commodities, but that is not a necessary condition for subcultures. A community united in opposition to some form of hegemonic discourse through common stylistic markers (loosely defined) is the essence of a subculture.

However, Sarah Thornton, in her 1995 book *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, suggests that Hebdige's conception of subcultures tends toward a monolithic design. He creates a binary between the subculture and the dominant culture that obscures actions of meaning-making and hierarchization within subcultures themselves. In order to reconcile these intra-subcultural hierarchies with Hebdige's concept of subcultures, she introduced the idea of "subcultural capital," based off of Bourdieu's earlier articulation of different forms of capital – economic, cultural, etc – that add nuance to the class distinction of members of a society. She argues that subcultures have their own ideologies that help their members construct their experience within that culture, with their own forms of subcultural capital that may be applicable only within that subculture, but vitally important nevertheless. For example, within club culture, she describes "hipness" as a form of cultural capital, though it may not be in other fields (11-12). Subcultural theory continues to be augmented and adjusted by various theorists; for example, Andrew Whelan discusses the idea of social hierarchies within the digital subculture of amateur electronic musicians, illustrating that Thornton's work remains vital and applicable in many scenarios.

Recent work by Beatrice Jetto has extended that idea to the subculture of music blogs, introducing the idea that “music blogs express their subcultural capital through the music they feature” (72). Jetto and Larissa Wodtke are the only scholars to focus directly upon this particular underground subculture, though Nancy Baym and Jessica Dyck have also explored aspects of music blogging and others have looked at blogging subcultures. Baym and Wodtke each developed the role of the music blog in different discourses. Baym engaged in an in-depth exploration of music blog communities in the context of the Swedish independent music scene and grounded her approach in the theory of fandom. Wodtke examined how mp3 blogs can be constructed and function independently of and in opposition to more traditional media sources, positioning music blogs more in the journalistic discourse.

Scholars haven’t seemed to be able to agree on a particular approach to music blogs thus far, as evidenced by Jessica Dyck, who comes from an ethnomusicological background and uses many aspects of that style when exploring Indian musicians’ use of music blogs to build community around their own original works. The music blogs that are the subjects of Dyck’s research have little in common with the music blogosphere subculture that I am studying, underscoring the diversity of the genre and the usefulness of establishing capital within the subculture in order to differentiate between different types of blogs. Each of these studies positions music bloggers differently: fans, journalists, and actual music producers.

In her 2010 book *Blog Theory*, however, Jodi Dean suggests that bloggers cannot be described in any of these terms. She notes that while journalists write for “an

imaginary community of everyone in the nation, state, or city” (46), bloggers have much more limited – or realistic – audiences. “Blogging opens possible encounters with the different and unexpected, whether in the form of the blogger’s own reflection on what she posts or in the reactions of others” (46). The form of blogging begets a new and different approach to authorship, thanks to its immediacy and the ability for interaction through comment sections, among other features. Even fandom fails to capture all that blogging makes possible, because “fans” typically write within their community of other fans. Dean emphasizes the relationship of trust developed between the blog and its readers, positioning blogs as more accurate search engines (in that readers can go to a blog to find information they may be seeking), while also noting the potentials for inter-blog discussion as well. She also theorizes that blog content can be minimal or short because “the value added...stems purely from the being added” (48), which is yet another distinction between blogging and other forms of authorship. While there may be elements of many different types of authors in the work that bloggers do, theirs is an original form of authorship in slight, but distinct ways.

I acknowledge that music blogs can embody many different identities in their approach to content and style, so I will eschew in-depth discussions of the discourse from which music blogs emerge. Instead, I will follow Dean’s conception of them as separate entities composed of pre-existing discourses, but forging a new path. Still, the work of music blog researchers, especially that of Wodtke and Jetto, addresses many other salient factors in the understanding of music blog subculture. For example, they each address the idea of authenticity. In fact, that seems to be a recurring theme within many discussions

of subcultures, and musical subcultures are certainly not exempt from this struggle (Thornton 26-34). While a full discussion of the implications of authenticity on subcultures remains outside the focus of this particular project, it is inextricably tied into the idea of subcultural capital, as we shall see. Thus, it is important to at least address the idea of “authenticity” peripherally.

An objective assessment of the nature of authenticity is less important than the perception of one’s authenticity by others in the subculture since authenticity is just another way of measuring sub-cultural capital. Members of this subculture, as is the case with most subcultures, have cultivated a definition of what constitutes cultural capital within their space. According to Wodtke’s research, which included a number of interviews with individual bloggers, bloggers are concerned with “selling out” as much as any underground culture. These writers disavow having too much advertising on a site, or appearing to shill for “corporate” music, as defined by being with a major record label, even when the artist in question may not be commercially successful (103-107). Jetto’s interviews support Wodtke’s observations, with one blogger estimating that he posts “less than 1%” of anything a major label sends his way (74). One might expect, then, that this opposition would lead to a definition of subcultural capital that refers to supporting lesser-known artists. However, Jetto also identifies the pressure felt by these bloggers to be influential within the music blogosphere, as opposed to merely charting their own personal interests or tastes (74), assuming of course that the two are at least somewhat mutually exclusive. According to these presuppositions, then, a music blogger has to make a choice: maintain so-called authenticity by supporting obscure independent artists

or, alternatively, promote the artists that everyone else is hyping in order to appear relevant.

Jetto does note that Bourdieu's conception of hierarchization within fields of cultural practice allows for contrasting logics, and she pits against one another the notion of authenticity based around the subcultural capital of "promoting music on the basis of their [the music bloggers'] aesthetic values only" (72) and the idea of commercial motivations on the parts of bloggers. Thus Jetto suggests that one of the main driving factors in the music blogs' subcultural hierarchy is the hidden desire for economic success, an external pressure exerting influence over the subculture. I do not intend to deny that this desire may exist for some bloggers, but there are also contrasting tensions *within* the idea of subcultural capital itself as bloggers reconcile their own interests and passions with the need for wider influence within the subculture.

Even with all of this significant work, the most salient research with regards to my theoretical framework is Sarah Thornton's combination of Hebdige and Bourdieu. Thornton applied Bourdieu's 1980s conception of cultural capital to Hebdige's subcultural markers, and redefined them as subcultural capital. Certain stylistic markers may not provide individuals with culture-wide capital, she says, but within subcultures, they can prove quite valuable. It is this aspect of subcultural theory that I am hoping to examine, and perhaps augment, within the subculture of North American indie rock music blogs. This is important to focus on, since much of the work done on subcultures has been on visual markers of style, like clothing, and that is less immediate with music blogs, which may not initially *look* any different than other sorts of blogs. In her work,

Thornton suggests that media play a role in constructing subcultures, but I'm treating a form of media as a subculture in its own right.

Another issue with subcultures is the threat of the massification of their subcultural markers, which is quite salient to the subculture of music blogs as artists that start out being covered by them can sometimes end up filtering up to the mainstream. This requires a constant reifying of subcultural status and increases the importance of understanding subcultural capital.

Chapter One: Blog Style – Aesthetics and Layout

The first of the blogs I'd like to look at more in-depth is *I Guess I'm Floating*, which offers a look very similar to many other music blogs. I will first describe much of the site's layout in order to compare and contrast the layouts of the other sites in the study with this one. I will show that, though there is some contrasting to be done amongst these sites, most of the layouts between the sites are remarkably similar. This is a space for these blogs to create their style – through similar features located in similar places on each site – which allows for the formation of subcultural capital. This is only one place for capital to be established, but it is a fundamental one. We will see that there are some very clear, if unspoken, guidelines for these blogs to follow.

Upon first accessing *IGIF*, the user is directed to a home page with multiple different points of reference on it. The eye may be drawn to any number of places, but the item that appears highest up on the page is an ad (at the moment of writing this, the ad is for Indieclick, which, according to their web site, “delivers innovative impactful

advertising campaigns and integrated brand experiences to relevant audiences across major and emerging media properties” or Google Offers, promising great deals specific to the user’s location, among other ads). Many of the bloggers in Wodtke’s 2008 study specifically avoided advertisements, “because they would compromise their [the bloggers’] integrity, and some cite the negative impact ads have on the aesthetics of a blog” (104). In Wodtke’s study, this was a dividing issue for bloggers, with others embracing advertising in order to support the costs of running their site and gathering music about which to write. In my small sample of blogs, there appears to be no debate; all four put advertisements on their sites. This observation does not mean that the debate has been resolved throughout the entirety of the subculture; in fact, Hebdige reminds us that the meaning of subculture is always being contested, and thus there are likely plenty of other sites that still refrain from advertising. However, this may be indicative of a trend toward a more accepting attitude toward advertising and monetizing what many had previously considered a hobby.

Below the ad is the masthead declaring the name of the site in flashing letters embedded in a graphic of an urban-looking series of rooftops. The low-tech, simple image reflects the independent aesthetic of the site in both content and style. Next to the main masthead is the first mention of music. Two rectangles feature scrolling images with captions such as “[MP3] new Andrew Bird: ‘Danse Carribe’” or “[Video Premiere] Tour ‘The Neighborhood’ with Giraffage.” These ten alternating images function as links to articles about each of the works mentioned in the captions. The row below these features quick links to “Home,” “New MP3s,” “Videos,” “Mixes,” “MPFree,”

“Contests,” and “RSS Feed,” each of which takes the user to an archive of all of the posts that have been tagged under each post type. They are displayed in reverse chronological order within each category. To the right of the quick-links is a search bar that allows the user to seek out specific content across the site’s archives, stretching all the way back to the time of the blog’s inception in late 2005.

It is only after all of these links and images that the user finally reaches the actual blog entries (to be clear, though, the user still would not have to scroll down the page at all in order to encounter this feature). Blog posts are written in a one-way communicative mode (i.e., content is produced by a single post author intended for consumption by the site’s many readers). They are posted in reverse chronological order, and each entry is date-stamped so the user can easily see what day it was posted on the website. Five full, unedited entries can be seen on the initial landing page of the site, and visiting previous pages, which are linked to toward the bottom of the site’s home page, will lead the user to earlier entries. Again, all posts are archived on the site. Clicking on the title of any of the blog entries leads to a separate page where the article, often consisting of at least one image and no more than two paragraphs, is hosted. There is usually no more content revealed, excepting an occasional embedded video, but this is the page where the user can see the comments that have been posted by other users regarding that article. Additionally, the site recommends four other articles that the user may find interesting if they enjoy the one on which they clicked.

As the main source of content on the site, the blog entries deserve a bit more analysis. Many blog posts are centered on an artist that the post author finds intriguing,

and the author often includes an mp3 from the artist in question that users can download to their hard drive and/or stream from the site itself. Mp3s are featured even on posts that are not about one artist in particular, and always connect the post to the mission of the site simply by virtue of their presence. Based on the two weeks of observation I conducted, I found that roughly two-thirds of their posts include downloadable mp3s, so it is an integral media type to *IGIF*. The posts that lack mp3s typically have some other form of media included, usually being either a streamable song that cannot be downloaded, or an embedded video. The use of downloadable mp3s on the site could cause some copyright concerns, but many of the bands covered by *IGIF* have remarkably limited distribution as of the time of their appearance on the site. It is likely that they refrain from pursuing legal action because the benefits of the publicity outweigh the cost of the infringement of their copyright. The politics of a choice like this warrants further research to test this hypothesis and fully understand these decisions, which is beyond the scope of this project, but needs to be pursued to understand the constraints under which music bloggers work.

The other prominent feature of each blog post is the hyperlink. Typically a blog post will have multiple hyperlinks linking out to a variety of different sites. Some of these links go to the artist's own site, some reference other articles posted on *I Guess I'm Floating* – perhaps another post featuring this same artist, for example – while other links go out to other music blogs who may have written about the artist in question. Then, there are informative links that could further elaborate on a movie, book, person or other thing that is merely referenced in passing in the post itself; other times, they may link to an

online music store, such as iTunes or Amazon, where a user may be able to purchase the music under discussion. Whatever the ultimate destination, each post typically contains multiple links that a user can follow at his or her discretion, meaning that the user's experience of the site shifts from person to person.

Certain entries onto the blog are ultimately privileged over others. Though all posts to the site appear in the same reverse chronological stream down the middle of the site's homepage, there are boxes down the right side of the page which provide quick-links for the reader to specific types of articles. There are two categories that the authors of IGIF have chosen to emphasize for their readers. The first is called "Hypeworthy." Hypeworthy posts differ from regular posts only in their length. Whereas most posts about new songs or artists feature one song – two at most – and two short paragraphs about the sound, Hypeworthy articles are longer, sometimes as many as five or six paragraphs, and feature multiple mp3s or at least streams to multiple songs. No new posts were added to the Hypeworthy section during the time of my study. The other box highlighting special content is called "History Mixery." Posts falling under the History Mixery tag appear quite infrequently – perhaps thrice per year – and focus on historical events that may or may not be related to music. One HM post was on the thirtieth anniversary of John Lennon's death, commemorating his life and artistic output, but another HM post was about the origins of Groundhog Day. In order to tie HM posts into the theme of the site, the authors still offer mp3s of current bands for streaming or download that are somehow related to the historical event under examination. When I first investigated this site there was an additional section of special blog posts called

“Reel Time Reviews.” These stylized record reviews provided a unique take into the author’s listening experience, but they were updated so rarely that it is no surprise the site’s authors have chosen to de-emphasize the posts. In fact, the infrequency of all these types of posts suggest that the majority of the site content is comprised of normalized posts, and their special placement on the sidebar of the site further emphasizes the unique nature of these posts as compared with the majority of *IGIF*’s output.

While Nathaniel and Connor, the authors and administrators of *IGIF*, design all of the aforementioned content, there is still an emphasis on the site’s users as well that is evident in many of the features promoted on the home page of the site. These user-oriented features help involve *IGIF*’s readers, despite the mostly one-way communication on the rest of the site. The most obvious emphasis on users comes in the form of plug-ins for external social media sites. The sidebar of the site contains both a plug-in for *IGIF*’s Twitter feed, as well as one for their Facebook account. The Twitter feed plug-in displays the latest tweet from their Twitter account, @IGIF, the content of which is overwhelmingly music-oriented.

Some of the tweets are informative in nature, declaring that a new post has been put up on the site; others are additional music commentary unrelated to a particular post on the site, such as this tweet from April 2, 2012, “trying to listen to the Chromatics album... if you put out an 1.5 hour album in 2012, don't begin with a song like ‘into the black’.” [sic], a reference to an album by the Chromatics that had been released the week before and covered by many sites, but not by *IGIF*. Not only

can a user see *IGIF*'s tweets posted directly on the site, they can also click anywhere on the plug-in to be taken immediately to *IGIF*'s Twitter page where they can sign up to follow the blog's posts there. With 4,031 followers [as of April 11, 2012] this is clearly a popular option.

The Facebook plug-in also offers interactivity to the site's users. One can begin following *IGIF*'s Facebook profile simply by clicking the "Like" button on the plug-in. Additionally, it displays the total number of *IGIF*'s Facebook friends, informing the user that there are 5,439 people [again, as of April 11, 2012] in the *IGIF* Facebook community. As a final touch, the plug-in displays a thumbnail version of the Facebook profile picture for ten of the people who have "liked" *IGIF* on Facebook, offering a kind of visual physicalization of the virtual readers of the website, and linking to their Facebook profiles if clicked upon. If one's Facebook privacy settings are open enough, the plug-in is even designed to privilege the user's Facebook friends over unknown people in these representations, which removes some of the anonymity that can accompany Internet interactions if the user has any Facebook friends who have also "liked" *IGIF*. Neither of these features – the Twitter plug-in nor the Facebook plug-in – was designed by *IGIF*, but their inclusion on the site, which is now common for many music blogs, is an important element in incorporating the users into the fabric of the site.

Neither of the social media features, however, is directly related to the content of the site. Instead, directly above those on the site's sidebar are two tabs for "Most Shared"

(which has replaced “Most Commented” in the year since I began my observation of the site) and “Most Viewed” blog posts, which are directly affected by the actions of users on the site, and reflect indirect input from them. The tab that is first shown by default is the “Most Shared” tab, which ranks blog articles by those that were shared most frequently on users’ social networks (Facebook, Google+, etc.). There appears to be a cutoff somewhere in the archived history of the site, though, since the entire top five (only five are displayed) are relatively recent posts. The site’s authors likely shifted from measuring user comments to user shares because there are very few comments at all. The comments are still a space for dispersed content creation that the site authors want to make prominently accessible to the site’s readers, but significantly more users are interacting with the site via sharing on social networks. Through this element, as well as the removal of the “Reel Time Reviews” section and other minor changes, we see that the site is constantly changing. This observation seems to parallel Hebdige’s contention that meaning in subcultures is always under construction. *IGIF* does not – can not – remain stagnant because it is never a fully-defined entity. Clearly, a broader exploration is required to make generalizations about the subculture as a whole, but this may be indicative of blogs’ responses to the shifting emphases of the subculture. In this case, as more members value “sharing” instead of commenting, they can alter their site layout accordingly.

The “Most Viewed” tab also does not show direct content creation by the users, but is itself a user-generated piece of content, in a sense. Traffic to each post determines which articles are featured in the “Most Viewed” section, and it is thus a direct reflection

of the habits of the site readers. Each of these methods may be indirect, but they give a chance for readers to “vote” on the types of artists most interested to them. It is difficult to discern from the site itself whether the authors respond to this in anyway, but it is an undeniable part of *IGIF*’s layout and ethos.

Though there are slight variations in site layout, the remaining three blogs in my test group all follow a very similar pattern to *IGIF*. For example, *Pretty Much Amazing* also features an ad and a masthead at the start of its page; however, the site flips the order, with the masthead proclaiming the site’s name being the very first element on the landing page. In fact, the ad doesn’t come until after other crucial elements like the search bar, and a group of featured recent posts (five instead of ten). At *PMA* there are only three main tabs at the top (as opposed to *IGIF*’s seven), which say “Home,” “About,” and “Shuffler.” None of these are depending on different categories of posts, as “About” gives the reader more information about the origins of the site and “Shuffler” takes the reader to a random recent post and begins playing the song embedded on the page. The ad appears before the body of posts.

Like *IGIF*, *PMA* presents its posts in reverse chronological order – a critical marker of a blog. Unlike *IGIF*, though, *PMA* only includes three lines of each post on the home page. The reader must click through the hyperlink to see the full text of each post. The right side of the page includes all of the necessary interactive markers: the ability to connect via RSS feed, email, or Twitter. It also contains the Facebook plugin that indicates the number of “likes” the site has on Facebook, as well as a “Radio” function that allows one to listen “to the music on PMA in one continuous mix.” It is essentially

the same as the “Shuffler” tab at the top of the page, and opens a separate tab or window so that one may continue perusing the site without disturbing the songs playing (unlike on *IGIF*). They also select out certain types of posts with their “PMACast,” “Official Selection,” “Lists,” and “Giveaways” tabs. These are not comprehensive lists, but rather selections from among the posts of that type that mix the recent with the popular.

Additionally, there are the posts that reflect reader engagement. Above the site-selected tabs mentioned above, there are four tabs that link the user to articles favorited by other site readers: “Most Viewed,” “Top MP3s,” “Favorite Songs,” and “Favorite Albums.” Presumably the first one or two are determined via page traffic, while the second two are determined through a rating system that *PMA* includes at the base of each individual post, where readers can express their opinions about the music featured on that particular page (with four choices: “Amazing,” “Great,” “OK,” and “Not for Me”). Again, there are some slight modifications in format here, like the users voting on posts or the logistics of the embedded music player, but overall *PMA* and *IGIF* follow similar formats.

Observations of *Pigeons & Planes* begin to suggest that there is a very definite format to a music blog. They too begin with the masthead, which has the logo and name of the site – *P&P* also includes a slogan, “There’s smoke in my iris, but I painted a sunny day on the insides of my eyelids.” There then is the customary search bar, and series of tabs, allowing for quick access of different posts in the site’s archive. *P&P*’s tab format more follows *IGIF* with the tabs, “News,” “Features,” “Audio,” “Video,” “Contests,” “About” and “Store.” Like *PMA*, though, the banner ad doesn’t appear until after all of

this primary information. In addition to the box ads that appear on the sides of the other sites, *P&P* has a clickable Dr. Pepper logo that remains in the bottom right corner of the browser as the user scrolls down the page and pops up a larger ad if clicked upon. Thanks to this, as well as the more standard advertisements, *P&P* is the most ad-heavy of the sites in this study. *P&P* additionally combines *IGIF*'s sliding featured recent posts at the top of the homepage with *PMA*'s smaller number of featured posts – five. Again, each of the posts appear in reverse chronological order with only three lines previewed from each article, forcing the reader to click through to the post itself. This may be indicative of the greater professionalism of a site like this one or *PMA*, which both see quite high readership numbers, since forcing readers to click on links within the site can drive up the number of page views and hence increase advertising revenue.

There are some notable differences between *P&P*'s site and the two already discussed. One is that, as the user scrolls down the page, the tab bar from the top remains static at the top of the browser. Additionally, as the user scrolls toward the bottom of the page, it continuously loads up archived posts in reverse chronological order, creating the feeling of a bottomless pit of content. Finally, the site has a “Shoutbox” in the vertical side bar on the right after the other, more common features (the Facebook plugin, the Twitter feed, the Top Posts). The Shoutbox functions as a Guestbook in which any visitor to the site can leave a message that is then displayed on the main page of the site, rather than in conjunction with a particular post. Interestingly, the site's authors sometimes respond to the comments, as when site user Batmayne writes, on April 9, 2012, “New Casey Veggies mixtape is really awesome!” He is ostensibly trying to alert the site's

authors to the existence of some new music he is enjoying. Thirty minutes later, Confusion, one of *P&P*'s main authors, responds, "Yeah let me know how that is. Might listen later but I wasn't that excited for it. Wanna give it a shot though [sic]". This kind of function facilitates the exchanges between user and blogger that characterizes blogs.

Austin Town Hall is probably the most different site structurally from the rest of the blogs examined here. It still has many of the same basic features as the other sites: a masthead (though *ATH*'s is much smaller and tucked away in the upper left-hand corner of the home page), a series of tabs ("contact," "news," etc.), a search bar, and a radio player filled with selections from the site. The vertical side bar on the right (at this point, apparently a staple of the music blog) features sections reflecting both special types of posts from the authors ("Friday Top 5s," "Artists to Watch," etc.) and the favorite posts of the site's visitors ("Week's Most Popular"). Additionally, *ATH* has all of its posts on the main page in reverse chronological order, and posts the full content of each one, like *IGIF* does. All of these common characteristics amongst the blogs can be considered the shared subcultural markers that Hebdige discussed as essential to any subculture. These are the elements of visual style that the blogs put forth to the rest of the world, and help distinguish them from other sites that may not be part of their particular subculture.

However, there are a few distinctions that separate *ATH* from the other blogs in this sample. Whereas the other music blogs had selected certain recent posts to feature at the top of the site, offering the visitor a brief sampling of the content they could find within, *ATH* displays just one longer-form article prior to the start of the list of posts. Usually an interview with a band, this prominent placement is more reminiscent of a

magazine layout than a blog's. At the least, it is different from other blogs. Additionally they have a list of album reviews (with star ratings) between the posts and the right side bar – an additional column not present in the other blogs, and one that also utilizes a regular feature of magazines. All other categories of blogging are present with *ATH*, so its identity seems secure in the subculture, but it blurs the stylistic boundaries. Finally, *ATH* doesn't feature any of the social media plug-ins (Twitter, Facebook) that the other blogs have, which may help explain why they only have 340 "like"s on Facebook – far below the rest of the sample group.

One of the intriguing trends that emerges after examining these music blogs as a group is the way "registrational interactivity" (Lister 21) is now manifested in the music blogosphere. Comments on blog posts are not a major part of a blog's content. Since these are sites where users can connect with other members of the subculture, and establish their own subcultural capital, it seems like there would be more activity surrounding them. However, the potentially capital-building interactivity is not absent, just re-located. *PMA*'s rating feature on posts, for example, or *P&P*'s Shoutbox are other places on the sites where users can let their voices be heard. Additionally, it seems that much of this interactivity is multimodal with the proliferation of social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, and their role as central platforms for a music blogger's expression. An in-depth exploration of social media's integration with blogger content falls outside of the confines of this report, but would be a valuable site of further research.

Ultimately, blog layout is one of the places where the blogs can demonstrate their membership in the subculture through the common stylistic markers that Hebdige identified in his original research into subcultures. All of the blogs in this small sample share the same basic characteristics and format on their webspace, deviating in slight ways in order to distinguish themselves. It is interesting to note, for example, that all of the blogs incorporate advertising in some capacity, contrary to what Wodtke's earlier research suggested. Perhaps it is just a coincidence borne of this particular sample, or perhaps it is a recent trend as more bloggers try to monetize what were before just passion projects. Either way, this seems to be an acceptable practice amongst this group of music bloggers and thus does not distinguish one from another. It seems, though, that content is a component of the site's construction in which each site can establish subcultural capital through negotiated difference.

From February 12-18, 2012 and March 25-31, 2012, I recorded every post made on all four of these websites. These weeks happened to follow two significant annual events for the music industry – the first day of the first week of observation was the day of the Grammys and the second week came in the wake of SXSW, where many fans, journalists, artists, and industry executives converge on Austin, Texas to hear thousands of performances. The extent of the influence of these events on the blogs under study is debatable. *ATH* was the only one that still seemed to be processing SXSW by March 25th (perhaps a function of its geographic ties to Austin) and the Grammys only showed up on *PMA* and *P&P* (perhaps because they are oriented toward a wider audience) and only then for a day or two. Mostly, these weeks appeared to be similar to any other week, and

likely represented a typical week in the life of each blog, which was the goal of the observation. The most obvious trend during this time was the frequency of posts. The two higher-profile sites – *P&P* and *PMA* – posted significantly more frequently than the other two. Over the course of the two weeks, *PMA* averaged 44 posts per week, while *P&P* averaged an impressive 72.5 posts per week. This is compared to *ATH*'s average of 23.5 and *IGIF*'s average of 6.5 (admittedly, it seemed that *IGIF* was having technical difficulties during the second week of my observation, but they still posted only nine during the first week). This tremendous disparity suggests that there is some sort of correlation (though not a direct one) between post volume and prominence within the subculture – at least, as measured via site visits and social media attention. This may be a function of staff size, as *P&P* counts as many as eight contributors, while the other three center around just two, aside from full-length album reviews on *PMA* and *ATH*, which appear sporadically.

Between *P&P* and *PMA*, there was a relatively large amount of overlap in terms of artists covered on each site. *P&P* had 41 posts (28%) over the two weeks that overlapped in content with *PMA*, which had 44 posts (50%) that overlapped with *P&P* (each had cases of multiple posts for an artist that other site covered only once). The two are collectively creating a group of artists that establish shared subcultural capital, as must be the case in any subculture. However, this means that each has a sizeable portion of their site content devoted to artists absent from the others' blog. *ATH*, though, has an even smaller amount of shared cultural capital. Over the two weeks, they only covered four artists that overlapped with artists on any of the three other blogs, meaning that only

8.5% of their site content led to the establishment of mutual subcultural capital with another member of the subculture. The other 90% of site content was devoted to unique artists (at least within this small sample size). *IGIF* is an even more extreme case in that none of their 13 posts covered artists that appeared on any of the other three sites. While the blog shares so much with the other members of the study in terms of site aesthetics and layout, the actual content on the site differs notably from others in the subculture.

In *ATH*'s case, it may be understandable that there is not as much overlap, since they promote themselves as being tied into their location. The name of their hometown is in the blog's title, they construct separate year-end lists for Texas bands, and they often connect posts to live concerts occurring in Austin, Texas. They understandably, then, devote far more space to bands from Austin than any of the other blogs in this sample study. Of the four blogs, *ATH* was the only one to cover an Austin artist over the two weeks of observation. During that time, nine of the 47 posts on *ATH* were Austin-centric (either Austin artists or events) for a total of 19% of their posts in that time period. Compared to the other blogs, this is a high number, but it is still a relatively small portion of the site content. In fact, over the same time period, 23% of *ATH*'s posts were on artists from the United Kingdom – a place that has no formal connection to *ATH*. Over those same two weeks, *P&P* had 14% of its content derived from UK artists while *PMA* had 18% of its content connected to there. *IGIF* was still at zero. So while *ATH* can lay claim to the most extensive Austin coverage of the group, it also had the most extensive coverage of the United Kingdom. This suggests that, while they position themselves as being Austin-centric, there is a limit to how much they can exercise their own content

control and still remain firmly situated within the subculture. It would be interesting to find a site that perhaps devoted over fifty percent of its content to one specific place and evaluate its level of subcultural capital. *ATH* is able to emphasize a particular location, but remains limited by the need to partially conform to subcultural expectations.

Similarly, *P&P* has tried to define itself as a site that emphasizes hip-hop more than most indie rock blogs. As with *ATH*'s similar claim to an Austin focus, *P&P* may have some merit. During the two weeks of observation, 56 of the site's 145 posts contained some sort of hip-hop or R&B song or artist, resulting in 39% of its content being focused in this genre. When compared to *ATH* and *IGIF*, neither of which posted any hip-hop or R&B during this study, *P&P* appears to have a much different focus. Compared to *PMA*, though, that distinction becomes less pronounced. Over the course of this study, *PMA* posted on hip-hop or R&B 24 times, comprising 27% of their 88 posts. It is still less than *P&P*, but not by as much. There were even some hip-hop/R&B artists, like Curren\$y and The-Dream to name two, who received coverage from *PMA* that were neglected by *P&P* during that time period. Again, this suggests that though *P&P* is trying to deviate from the shared subcultural capital, there is a limit to the extent to which they are able to do so. Along with *ATH*, they demonstrate the tension that exists in the indie rock music blog subculture. Based on this preliminary research, it seems that some sites strive to assert individuality, but are limited in the extent to which this may occur.

Chapter Two: Blog Content

The first phase of research was an in-depth exploration of a limited sample size in order to better understand elements of the subculture. However, to explore the apparent tension between unique content elements and shared subcultural capital, it was necessary to expand the sample size and examine if this was a trait evident in many blogs. In order to operationalize this tension, I decided to focus on that staple of music journalism: the year-end list. By cataloguing the year-end song and album lists from 2009 (the only year in which all of these blogs were in existence) on each of the websites, I could find patterns amongst artists that the sites championed. The context in which a subculture locates itself is essential in understanding that against which the subculture defines its existence, so I also wanted to examine *Rolling Stone's* own year-end lists, since the magazine is an example of the hegemonic mainstream music media. Hebdige warns that mainstream cultural sources inevitably begin co-opting elements of subcultures in order to maintain hegemonic control, and *Rolling Stone's* lists might be sites for this kind of appropriation. *Pitchfork* garners over a million more hits per month than the next closest indie music site in the study, so they could also be considered a force beyond the independent music blogosphere, despite still falling short of *Rolling Stone* in overall readership, and thus mainstream penetration.

Therefore, my theory was that, as a highly visible figure in the music blogosphere, *Pitchfork* would establish the status quo for the music blogosphere and thus many blogs would overlap with *Pitchfork's* recommendations, in order to establish the shared subcultural markers around which other members could gather. In this sense, *Pitchfork* acts as an agenda-setter for the subculture. However, if my theory is accurate about

subcultural capital in the music blogosphere being built around difference as well as similarity, then other members of the music blogosphere would also consciously reject some of *Pitchfork's* choices, and champion artists that did not appear on that site. *Rolling Stone*, though, would see little overlap by my hypothesis, as many of its recommendations likely come from the mainstream. The 38 non-*Pitchfork* blogs cited in the music video would constitute my experimental group.

Only 25 of the 38 had year-end lists for 2009 that were available on their websites. Many of the 13 without apparent lists did not have easily accessible archives, and so may have had lists that are no longer available. One, *Pop Tarts Suck Toasted*, might once have had a list but it was hosted on Blogspot.com, which shut down the site in February 2010 for illegally sharing mp3s. One of the 25 was from Scotland, and since I am focusing my research on North American blogs, I removed it from consideration. Of the 24 North American blogs with lists, some had album lists while others had song lists, so I grouped by list type by the artist to whom either the album or song could be credited. Thus, an artist would be checked off if either an album *or* song appeared on a list. Admittedly, sometimes, different songs would represent the same artist on different lists (and in rare occasions, different albums), but for my purposes that was not distinguished in my research.

After compiling all of my data, I decided that a “marginal” band would be one that appeared on no other blog’s lists. The “hype-worthy” bands were the 15 that appeared on at least nine or more music blogger year-end lists, an admittedly arbitrary distinction that at least allowed for a large enough sample size to make significant

observations and conclusions. For example, the groups Animal Collective and Grizzly Bear both appeared on 16 of the 24 lists, Phoenix was on 14 of the 24, etc. The other artists by whom shared subcultural capital was measured were the XX, the Dirty Projectors, the Antlers, St. Vincent, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Girls, Bat for Lashes, Fever Ray, Flaming Lips, Passion Pit, Atlas Sound, and Sunset Rubdown, all of whom can be comfortably classified as indie rock. Of the 406 unique artists mentioned between all 26 publications studied, these were the 15 that appeared most frequently and thus seemed the logical choices around which to focus notions of collective subcultural capital.

Finally, I devised a simple ratio for each blog of hype-worthy bands to marginal bands to be able to organize blogs on a spectrum from esoteric to mainstream within the context of the subculture. One of the problems with my initial data collection, which I will admit to at the beginning, is that when calculating “marginal” artists, I factored in the artist’s inclusion in either the *Pitchfork* list or the *Rolling Stone* list. To be truly a reflection of the subculture, I should only have compared them with other members of the music blogosphere.

Interestingly, every blog but one included at least one hype-worthy artist, suggesting that there is a strong pressure toward conformity in this subculture, as is supported by virtually all previous work on subcultures. The outlier was *Pigeons and Planes*, whose focus on hip-hop artists was reflected in its year-end selections. However, it was also the only blog to create a year-end list with an explicit focus on so-called “underrated” bands, according to each site’s introduction of its year-end list. Of the nine artists cited on their list, though, only five could be classified as “marginal” (still a pretty

sizeable percentage). Two of the nine (Miike Snow and Discovery) were actually included in *Pitchfork's* year-end lists, though did not reach the critical mass to approach the “hype-worthy” label. One of the “marginal” artists was J. Cole, a major-label rapper who had yet to receive what *Pigeons and Planes* deemed sufficient commercial success and thus still could be classified as “underrated.” However, the blogger seems to grapple with his inclusion, stating, “I wasn’t sure if J.Cole [sic] belonged on this list. He’s not really underrated, because most people put him up there as one of the top up and coming emcees...[but] a lot of people I talk to (who don’t frequent hip-hop blogs) still have absolutely no idea who he is.” The author seems aware of impending criticisms against his choice, which appears to fall outside of the accepted subcultural artists, and tries to preemptively defend against them by using members outside of their niche within the subculture as justification. The author implicitly recognizes the elements that place him both inside and outside of the subculture and is struggling to balance those competing identities in his selections.

On the other end of the spectrum, only two of the 24 blogs failed to include any “marginal” choices. One of them was Vancouver-based *Winnie Cooper*, which selected only a song by Bat for Lashes as their “top song” of the year and went no further. Due to the small sample size of its year-end list, its relationship to the subcultural capital of the music blogosphere is indeterminate. The other outlier here was *The Music Slut*, which had readers vote on their top 13 albums of the year, and thus was perhaps not an accurate reflection of the bloggers’ opinions. Of the 13 albums selected, nine of them could be classified as “hype-worthy” with none of the other choices approaching “marginal.” Even

if this was not a reflection of the bloggers' own choices for top albums of the year, the fact that they published it as representative of their site is significant, and remains the largest outlier among the sample.

However, two other year-end lists were voted upon and another was aggregated and each of these featured one or two “marginal” artists. One example is *Tsururadio*, whose list was voted upon by members of their “society.” As *Tsururadio*'s founder, Aaron, explains, “Unfortunately, due to an alarming amount of spammers, ragamuffins, & ne'er-do-wells, we had to take our beloved home to ‘invite-only’.” In other words, Aaron wanted to limit membership to those within the subculture. It is unclear what some did to demand their exclusion from the site, but there is clearly a boundary being enforced. The voted-on list of 20 albums includes eight hype-worthy artists, and one marginal artist: the Danish prog-rock band Mew, who are remarkably successful in Scandinavia but not as much in the USA, out of where *Tsururadio* is based. The other voted-on list was provided by *Stereogum* and was much more open to other voters than *Tsururadio*'s, though it is unclear what kinds of readers comprised the voters (regular readers, first-time visitors to the site, etc.). All 15 of the hype-worthy artists appeared on their top 50 list, and their two “marginal” artists – Silversun Pickups and Regina Spektor – had albums that charted in the Billboard Top 10 in 2009 in the US. However both of those artists appeared toward the bottom of the list, and had I not compared their list with *Pitchfork*'s, they could also cite the legitimately obscure Rural Alberta Advantage as a “marginal” artist. It is also notable that there was significant overlap between the list from *Stereogum* and that from *Hype Machine*, which was an aggregation of lists from

over 550 different music bloggers. *Hype Machine* also included all 15 hype-worthy artists, and had two “marginal” artists who weren’t all that obscure (Muse and Manchester Orchestra, neither unfamiliar with commercial success). Despite the arguably mainstream categorization of each of the “marginal” artists from the voted-on lists, it is still noteworthy that collectives of individuals selected artists that were not appearing on other blogs, while simultaneously reifying the importance of the hyped 15 within their subculture.

Including these outliers, 13 of the 24 blogs had a hype-worthy:marginal ratio of less than one, meaning that they tended to favor “marginal” artists. On some occasions, these were artists whose songs or albums had come out the year before, in 2008, and the blogs simply appeared to have been exposed to them late. In other cases, blogs included leaked tracks from artists that ended up officially releasing the material in 2010. A longitudinal study would be able to ascertain how “marginal” those artists really were, but would encounter other problems due to the turnover in the blogging world. Some blogs with more of a local focus, like *Each Note Secure* from Cincinnati, had more local acts on their year-end lists that would help account for their larger inclusion.

Another interesting example comes from the blog with the ratio that would classify it as most “marginal” – aside, of course, from *Pigeons and Planes*, who adequately qualified their list and are slightly outside the genre designations of the rest of the sample group. Christopher Weingarten, the blogger behind *1000X Yes* whose mission is to review 1000 albums per calendar year via his Twitter feed, published a list of his top 100 albums of the year via the blog for alternative weekly *The Village Voice* (and linked

to it from his Twitter feed). It included merely 4 hype-worthy artists (Animal Collective, Grizzly Bear, Bat for Lashes, and Flaming Lips), but 67 different “marginal” artists, for a .06 ratio on my scale. Though he technically falls into the subculture by these measurements, Weingarten made two critical mistakes. The first is that he was trying too hard, and this was made evident in some of the comments left on the post. Scott Curtis wrote, “This is bullshit.” Naughty said, “this [sic] is the worst 100 in the universe.” And Tommy wrote, “Chris lost all credibility with this list.” These commenters are reacting in part to the massive disparity in Chris’ ratio because such a dramatic number of “marginal” artists is unsettling. Perhaps including more hype-worthy artists, or fewer marginal artists, instead would have tempered some of the criticisms.

Another error Weingarten made, though, was in his choice of a #1 album. His best album of the year was *21st Century Breakdown* by Green Day, one of the top-selling rock bands over the last two decades. He could hardly have put forward a more mainstream choice. While it may be acceptable to other members of the music blogosphere to slip Green Day into a list towards the end of it as a nod toward the mainstream or an admission of guilty pleasure, clearly its position in the vaunted number one spot was troubling. Aforementioned commenters Naughty and Tommy both cited Green Day as part of their reasoning for their displeasure with Weingarten’s list, and even a list supporter, puja, made clear that she did not think Green Day was a suitable number one selection.

The importance of the number one position is supported elsewhere in my research. One of the most fascinating trends was that the six least “marginal” blogs

(*Winnie Cooper* and their “top song” of the year notwithstanding) all cited Animal Collective’s *Merriweather Post Pavilion* as their top album of the year. This includes three voted-on lists, one aggregated list, and two lists directly from bloggers themselves (*Pasta Primavera* and *Minneapolis Fucking Rocks*). Two other blogs that were roughly average in terms of their “marginality,” *Tiny Mix Tapes* and *Pretty Much Amazing* also made Animal Collective’s their top album of the year. The 12 “most marginal” blogs, essentially the entire bottom half of the study, made other choices for top album. This pattern suggests that the number one album of the year may be a nice indicator as to how any given blog will position itself within the subculture. Of the 11 other blogs that ranked albums or songs, five selected a different hype-worthy artist as their number one, for a total of 13 blogs choosing hype-worthy artists as their top selection – just over half of the sample. Of the remainders, three still chose artists that appeared on either or five or six different year-end lists (*Daily Beatz* chose Miike Snow; *Muzzle of Bees* chose Avett Brothers; *Gorilla Vs. Bear* chose Raekwon;). That leaves three who opted for marginal or near-marginal choices. *Indie Music Filter* acknowledged in its write-up of Foreign Born’s album that it was not a popular choice, and intimated that may be part of the reason for their selection of it. Either way, the self-awareness on display suggested a conscious but temporary rebuke of the subculture’s shared artists. *Everybody Taste* selected Forest Fire with little self-awareness, but it seems to have been acceptable because of the true obscurity of the artist. The only remaining choice was the painfully mainstream Green Day by *1000X Yes*, clearly an outlier amongst music blogs and one that *1000X Yes* was made aware of through comments left on the post. Notably, the four blogs that did not

rank their choices all appeared in the “marginal” half of the list; there is likely some significance to this pattern, as well.

Looking at my two control publications also yields interesting observations. For example, *Pitchfork*, the standard-bearer for the music blogosphere, has a hype-worthy:obscure ratio of less than one (in fact, it is the exact same ratio as *Pretty Much Amazing*). *Pitchfork*, predictably, includes 14 of the hype-worthy 15 in their year-end lists. Yet they also remarkably include 21 “marginal” artists. Admittedly, only one of these artists appears on their top 50 albums list; they take much greater liberties with their top 100 songs lists (which may be another interesting future study about potential sites for the creation of hierarchy or capital). In *Pitchfork*’s case, however, very few of the “marginal” artists could be written off as “mainstream,” indeed perhaps Taylor Swift is the only one inarguably located in that category. Many of the other artists are legitimately marginal (Darkstar, Pictureplane, Bowerbirds, Delorean, Matias Aguayo, etc), which I defined as moving very few units of their work. In addition to the 21 officially “marginal” artists, several others overlap with only one music blog (for example, Matt & Kim, Wavves, Best Coast, Joy Orbison, the Thermals, A Sunny Day in Glasgow, etc.). *Pitchfork* maintains its status at the top of the music blogosphere’s hierarchy by adhering to the subcultural capital, despite attracting millions more hits per month than the next most popular music blog. Through their inclusion of most of the hype-worthy 15 (but noticeably not *all*), as well as their number one choice on both album and song list of Animal Collective, they remain relevant, while through their inclusion of a number of

“marginal” bands, they are able to maintain a sense of hipness and credibility that is also essential for continued membership in this subculture.

Rolling Stone presents another interesting case study. The research did not support my original theory that there would be very little overlap between artists covered by the music blogs and those covered by *Rolling Stone*. In reality, *Rolling Stone* included eight of the hype-worthy 15 in their year-end list, a potentially significant piece of data. Music blogs have positioned themselves in opposition to the “mainstream,” which *Rolling Stone* surely represents, but this appears to be evidence of Hebdige’s theory in action. He asserts that the dominant ideology inevitably co-opts commodities from subcultures in order to maintain hegemony (Hebdige 15-16). The music blogging subculture has become so large and influential in the world of music journalism that mainstream publications like *Rolling Stone* are forced to adopt some of the markers of it in order to remain relevant themselves. Another interpretation of this finding, though, is that the music blog subculture is not quite as alternative to the mainstream as they think, and this would seem hard to disprove, but perhaps it can be through looking at *Rolling Stone*’s “marginal” artists. There were five artists that *Rolling Stone* featured in their year-end lists that did not appear anywhere else in my research. These five were: Bob Dylan, Miley Cyrus, the Black Eyed Peas, Levon Helm (formerly of The Band) and Pearl Jam. None of these artists is truly marginal; each has enjoyed periods of immense commercial success at varying times throughout their careers. It is clear then that the only markers of *Rolling Stone*’s “hipness” had already been articulated by the music blogosphere. Additionally, their choice for both top album and top song were U2, a choice that is

arguably as mainstream as *1000X Yes's* Green Day, and as evidenced by our earlier analysis of number one choices in year-end lists, this is even more evidence that they could not claim membership within the subculture of music blogging. While they may have adhered to one facet of the subcultural capital – bestowing accolades on a similar group of subculturally agreed upon artists – they failed at the other major facets. Thus, they remain outside the subculture, instead contributing instead to its mainstreamification.

Conclusion

It is certainly evident that Thornton's construct of "hipness" applies as a form of subcultural capital in the form of support for "hype-worthy" bands. Music blogs reinforce the existence of a group of artists around whom they can prove their connection to the subculture. Some sites devote more attention to these artists than other sites may, but it is still a critical element to a site's immersion in the subculture. The data suggests that the other side of my contention is true as well; blogs must support artists that no other blog is advocating. This is a critical element to "hipness" as well. We have also seen certain strong manifestations of this capital in the form of number one albums or songs chosen on the year, where the competing dualities are evident across the spectrum of blogs.

While examining the nature of subcultural capital in the subculture of music blogs, I noted some interesting patterns in blog readership that I have alluded to at various points throughout this paper. Since the initial stages of my research in late 2010, most of the blogs contained in this paper have seen declines in readership – often losing

as many as half of their monthly hits. *Pigeons & Planes* and *Pretty Much Amazing* are actually two of the only sites that saw an increase in monthly visits. I would like to think that this is due to an increase in subcultural membership – more music blogs emerging across the continent that are diverting readers from their original sources of new music. However, there could just be a general decline in membership. Perhaps the discussions addressed in this paper are irrelevant because the music blog subculture is fading away just as Hebdige’s punks eventually did. If this is the case, then the question would be: why? Did the mainstream co-opt enough of the artists and aesthetics of these sites to make this particular subculture unappealing? Are there other, newer outlets fulfilling the same function as music blogs – providing a counterhegemonic reading of independent music? If this is indeed the case, it raises questions about how subcultures end, or at least how they adapt and change in response to the mainstream’s response to them. However, I do not believe this is what is happening in the music blogosphere. Despite some asserting the death of blogging (Dean 33), music blogs still remain the most vital way to be exposed to new musicians during the early stages of their careers, and as long as there are people interested in expressing their “hipness” through their musical taste, there will be a space for music blogs.

Though it seems unlikely that we are witnessing the demise of the subculture of music blogs, the findings in this paper nevertheless have potential repercussions beyond just this particular subculture. As I have stated, nothing here is generalizable. The studies I conducted are glimpses at specific moments in time, but they suggest potential conclusions that warrant further study. My research suggests an even more nuanced take

on subcultural capital than has been previously articulated. Members of this subculture are not just coalescing around shared subcultural markers in opposition to an external hegemonic force, they are defining themselves in contrast to their peers. While there is unity in being a member of the subculture, there is also a need to exert the uniqueness of that member as well in order to remain a member of the subculture. It is a prerequisite for membership. Thus, there is similarity through difference, togetherness through individuality. It is subculture for the digital age, and suggests that our understanding of society's margins continues to shift and grow.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “About WordPress.” *WordPress*. n.p., n.d. Web. 11 April 2012.
- Austin Town Hall*. Web. 31 March 2012.
- Atton, Chris. *An Alternative Internet: Radical Media, Politics and Creativity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004.
- Ayers, Michael D. “The Cyberactivism of a Dangermouse.” *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture*. ed. Michael D. Ayers. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006.
- Baym, N., ‘The new shape of online community: The example of Swedish independent music fandom’, in *First Monday*, 12 (8) 2007, viewed on 15 October 2010, <http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue12_8/baym/index.html>.
- Blood, Rebecca. □Weblogs: A history and perspective. | Rebecca’s Pocket. 2000. 4 August 2008, http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html.
- Bourdieu, P., *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Dean, Jodi. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. London: Polity Press, 2010.
- Delloro, Carter. “The Subculture of Music Blogs.” PCA National Conference, San Antonio, April 2011. Unpublished conference proceedings.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- Gill, Kathy. “How can we measure the influence of the blogosphere?,” Presented at the Workshop on the Weblogging Ecosystem at the 13th International World Wide Web Conference (New York, May 18, 2004); http://faculty.washington.edu/kegill/pub/www2004_blogosphere_gill.pdf.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Methuen, Inc., 1979.
- Hodkinson, P., ‘Subcultural Blogging. Online Journals and Group Involvement Among UK Goths’. *Uses of Blogs*. A. Bruns & J. Jacobs (eds), Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2006.

I Guess I'm Floating. Web. 31 March 2012.

Ifversen, Jan. "Text, Discourse, Concept: Approaches to Textual Analysis." *Kontur* 7 (2003): 60-69.

Jetto, Beatrice. "Music Blogs, Music Scenes, Sub-cultural Capital: Emerging Practices in Music Blogs." Viewed on 26 November 2010, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/jettopaper.pdf>

Jones, Steve. "Music and the Internet." *Popular Music* 19.2 (2000): 217-30.

Lister et al., "New Media & New Technologies." *New Media: A Critical Introduction*. ed. Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings, Iain Grant, Kieran Kelly. New York: Routledge, 2003. 9-37.

Matheson, Donald. "Weblogs and the epistemology of the news: some trends in online journalism." *New Media & Society* 6.4 (2004): 443-68.

Miller, Carolyn R. and Dawn Shepherd. "Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog." *Into the Blogosphere*. 2004. 4 August 2008
[http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogging as social action a genre analysis of the weblog.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogging%20as%20social%20action%20a%20genre%20analysis%20of%20the%20weblog.html)

Pigeons & Planes. Web. 31 March 2012.

Pretty Much Amazing. Web. 31 March 2012.

Schmidt, Jan. "Blogging Practices: An Analytical Framework." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. 12 (2007): 1409-1427.

Thornton, Sarah. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1996.

Whelan, Andrew. "Do U Produce?: Subcultural Capital and Amateur Musicianship in Peer-to-Peer Networks." *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture*. ed. Michael D. Ayers. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006.

Wodtke, L., *Does NME Even Know What a Music Blog Is?: The Rhetoric and Social Meaning of MP3 Blogs*. VDM Verlag, Germany, 2008.