



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **A Critical Reframing of Subcultural Cool and Consumption**

Dick Hebdige, University of California, USA

Andrew Potter, University of Toronto, Canada

Hebdige and Potters's presentation will develop a critique of coolhunting and extension of subcultural research in sociology and cultural studies. Coolhunting is usually inter-pretred as a corporate attempt to co-opt the styles and fashions of genuinely subversive subcultures. Yet it is important to note that "cool" itself is not subversive. To see this, Hebdige and Potter profile and systematize the amount of friction in the transmission of cultural information. It takes a long time for subcultural trends in fashion or music or speech to move from the streets of London or New York City to the suburban basements of Omaha or Ottawa. The phenomenon we call "cool" is a consequence of that friction. Coolhunters exploit the time lag for profit, and hipsters for the power to treat everyone else with contempt. Hebdige and Potter will draw from a variety of empirical sources to develop their alternative approach to countercultural co-optation.

### **[to cite]:**

Dick Hebdige and Andrew Potter (2007) ,"A Critical Reframing of Subcultural Cool and Consumption", in E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 8, eds. Stefania Borghini, Mary Ann McGrath, and Cele Otnes, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 527-530.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14019/eacr/vol8/E-08>

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**SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY**  
**Research Adventures in Co-optation: News from the Field**  
Markus Giesler, York University, Canada

**SESSION INTRODUCTION**

The idea that countercultural consumer movements permeate into the commercial mainstream is a staple notion in sociology and cultural studies (e.g., Hebdige 1979; Frank 1997; Gladwell 1997; Heath and Potter 2004). This idea of co-optation is also central to consumer culture theory (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander 1995; McCracken 1997; Kozinets 2002; Holt 2002). Together, these existing studies present two alternative theoretical explanations of co-optation. Either countercultural movements are autonomous systems where consumers enjoy community, gift giving, and cultural creativity until commercialism creeps in and destroys the counterculture's subversive distinctiveness (Gladwell 1997; Hebdige 1979). Or countercultural rebellion "simply feeds the flames [of consumer capitalism], creating a whole new set of positional goods for these new rebel consumers to compete for" (Heath and Potter 2004, 322).

This session, a joint effort by scholars in sociology, cultural studies, and consumer culture theory, will present recent advances in co-optation theory grounded in three completed empirical studies. From our perspective, existing theories are predisposed to interpret co-optation as an overly functionally integrated and internally consistent process of cultural mainstreaming, and conversely to overlook some of its commercial and political qualities. Our interdisciplinary reading offers a critical rethinking of many now taken-for-granted assumptions about cultural rebellion, creative consumption, the process of co-optation, and, more broadly, marketplace politics itself.

We seek to re-conceptualize countercultural co-optation as a political process of shifting and perpetually morphing relationships between power and resistance and as a historical struggle of opposing cultural and commercial stakeholder groups over the normative definition of consumer practice. To pursue this goal, we present three completed empirical investigations of marketplace co-optation dynamics, one of which was conducted by two pioneering co-optation theorists in cultural studies. We develop a number of important theoretical and empirical implications following from these empirical studies to a variety of key consumer culture and cultural studies constructs.

Hebdige and Potters's presentation will develop a critique of coolhunting and extension of subcultural research in sociology and cultural studies. Coolhunting is usually interpreted as a corporate attempt to co-opt the styles and fashions of genuinely subversive subcultures. Yet it is important to note that "cool" itself is not subversive. To see this, Hebdige and Potter profile and systematize the amount of friction in the transmission of cultural information. It takes a long time for subcultural trends in fashion or music or speech to move from the streets of London or New York City to the suburban basements of Omaha or Ottawa. The phenomenon we call "cool" is a consequence of that friction. Coolhunters exploit the time lag for profit, and hipsters for the power to treat everyone else with contempt. Hebdige and Potter will draw from a variety of empirical sources to develop their alternative approach to countercultural co-optation.

Giesler and Luedicke's presentation will develop the historical process of co-optation using seven-year ethnographic data set on the war on music downloading and the construct of marketplace drama, a fourfold series of antagonistic performances among opposing stakeholder groups of consumers and producers through

which their divergent ideological goals are attained and the economic and competitive characteristics of specific market structures are transformed. This theoretical construct offers a useful mechanism for examining how a market system's ideals and norms are historically institutionalized in a dramatic market narrative, which provides the dynamic meaning system in which the assimilation of subcultural consumption styles is situated.

Thompson and Coskuner-Balli's paper explores countervailing market responses to corporate co-optation and the ideological recruitment of consumption communities. From a conventional theoretical standpoint, the corporatization of the organic food movement is a classic example of corporate cooptation. Cooptation theory conceptualizes the commercial marketplace as an ideological force that assimilates the symbols and practices of a counterculture into dominant norms. Their alternative argument is that co-optation can generate a countervailing market response that actively promotes the oppositional aspects of a counterculture attenuated by the process of commercial mainstreaming. They analyze community supported agriculture (CSA), which has emerged in response to the corporate cooptation of the organic food movement. They conclude by discussing how tacit political ideologies structure consumption communities.

We anticipate that the discussant, Doug Holt, will help the audience to debate issues such as: What is the relationship between consumers' countercultural movements and the commercial market? What is the potential of countercultural movements to repoliticize their co-opted countercultural styles? What is the role of historical and political narratives in the cultural production and assimilation of countercultural consumption styles? The proposed session is a timely one with particular relevance to researchers interested in the relations between market politics and consumption. It should also greatly appeal to researchers who-in an effort to theorize consumer resistance, and market rebellion and evolution-are looking for contextual input from a variety of disciplinary sources outside of their own research paradigm. This session will help these researchers to consider the value of co-optation studies in their own research.

**ABSTRACTS**

**"A Critical Reframing of Subcultural Cool and Consumption"**

*Dick Hebdige & Andrew Potter*

The standard view of rebellious consumption and the dynamics of cool goes something like this: First a subculture arises around a certain style of rebellious consumption, such as punk rock, skateboarding, or organic produce. In its original form, this subculture is genuinely subversive; that is, it poses a genuine threat to the established capitalist order. But as the subculture becomes more popular, corporations move in. They take the elements of the subculture, bleach out the subversive elements, and sell a denuded, non-threatening version of the subculture to the masses. This is known as co-optation. Because of co-optation, anyone looking for a subversive ("cool") subculture must be constantly trying to keep one step ahead of the corporations (e.g., Hebdige 1979).

Unfortunately, this story is theoretically inaccurate. The idea of cool consumption as essentially political has been around since the 1800s, but it became a defining part of our cultural self-

understanding in the 1950s. It is also one of the most misguided political poses of the past half century (Heath and Potter 2004). Norman Mailer set the agenda for cool in the 1950s, when he wrote that society was divided into two types of people: the Hip (“rebels”) and the Square (“conformists”) (Mailer 1954). Cool (or hip, alternative, edgy) here becomes the universal stance of individualism, with the hipster as the resolute nonconformist refusing to bend before the homogenizing forces of mass society (Gladwell 1997).

This is to say that the notion of cool only ever made sense as a foil to something else, i.e. a culture dominated by mass media such as national television stations, wide-circulation magazines and newspapers, and commercial record labels. For the counterculture, mass society was displeasing not only aesthetically, but politically as well. The media were particularly noxious, as the primary mechanism through which elites hold on to power. The people are kept pacified by sitcoms, terrified by the nightly news, and satisfied by the products sold on the ads in between. The hipster makes a political statement by rejecting mass society and its conformist agenda (Heath and Potter 2004).

But the truth is, cool is not political. Never was. What it has been, for most of the past 40 years, is the central form of status in urban life. To see this, we show empirically that there was always a tremendous amount of friction in the transmission of cultural information. It took a long time for subcultural trends in fashion or music or speech to move from the streets of London or New York City to the suburban basements of Omaha or Ottawa. The phenomenon we call “cool” was a historical consequence of that friction. We show how past coolhunters exploited this time lag for profit, and hipsters for the power to treat everyone else with contempt.

Next we show that the old mass-media ecosystem has disappeared, replaced by the rip/mix/burn culture of the Internet with its blogs and podcasts, in which there is no longer any distinction between producers and consumers. Trends appear as nothing more than brief consumerist shivers, passé the moment they appear, like last year’s kelly-green colour craze or 2003’s Ugg boots (Gladwell 1997).

The prevailing aesthetic is not cool, but quirky, dominated by unpredictable and idiosyncratic mash-ups of cultural elements that bear no meaningful relationship to one another. Appreciating the anti-logic of quirk is the only way to navigate the movies of Wes Anderson (Jeff Goldblum in an “I’m a Pepper” T-shirt!) or the various tangents of Dave Eggers’ *McSweeney’s* publishing empire. To show the existence of this quirk aesthetic, we investigate *www.boingboing.net*, a “directory of wonderful things” that gets well over 300,000 visitors a day. A typical week of entries will draw your attention to a video of a man dropping 20 kg of Silly Putty off a building, an archive of Soviet-era children’s cartoons and a make-your-own-sex-toys blog. There is no rhyme or reason to any of it, apart from that it is all, in its own quirky way, “kinda neat.”

Young consumers today know all of this instinctively. Having never really experienced the tyranny of mass society, they don’t feel any great urge to stand against it. That is why they adopted the word “random” as their preferred term of approbation. The people who have a problem with the death of cool are aging hippies and other stubborn counterculturalists who remain attached to the idea of a mass society and its right-wing agenda of cultural conformity. In contradistinction, we find that the mass-media citadel has vanished into digital dust, and something interesting did not happen on the way to the public seizing the means of cultural production: the system didn’t collapse, capitalism wasn’t overthrown and we didn’t become any less consumerist. The blogosphere is notoriously dominated by right-wing voices (Gladwell 1997).

Will the new culture of quirk give rise to a new political consciousness? Perhaps, though probably not. But what it has done

is eliminate cool as a needless social hierarchy. That is something in which the status-conscious rest of us can quietly rejoice, knowing that we have one less thing to be anxious about.

### “How Does Drama Drive Market Evolution? The Co-optation of Music Downloading”

*Markus Giesler & Marius K. Luedicke*

In this presentation, we develop the construct of marketplace drama to show how and why a countercultural consumption style permeates into the commercial mainstream. We define a marketplace drama as a fourfold series of antagonistic performances among opposing stakeholder groups of consumers and producers through which their divergent ideological goals are attained and the economic and competitive characteristics of specific market structures are transformed. This construct offers a useful mechanism for examining how a market system’s ideals and norms are historically institutionalized in a dramatic market narrative, which provides the dynamic meaning system in which the emergence and assimilation of subcultural consumption styles is situated.

We develop this alternative theorization of the co-optation process through a dramaturgical analysis of the seven-year cultural conflict that unfolded after the emergence of music downloading. Based on conceptual findings from social and consumer drama theory, we trace the multi-year co-optation of music downloading from its beginning in 1999 to the present and reveals some of the cultural and political dynamics involved in the struggle between corporate music executives seeking to assimilate downloading and downloaders seeking to re-politicize their co-opted consumption meanings and styles. We find that downloaders and corporate music executives draw from a shared music market narrative of Intellectual Civilization. This narrative valorizes (and invites market agents to actively engage in) the bridging of seemingly contradictory cultural ideals of musical sharing and owning as heroic performance. By prescribing a balance between musical owning and sharing, this music market narrative has driven the integration of music downloading into commodified forms over four dramatic phases of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration.

Classic co-optation theorists will always be haunted by their inability to transcend the artificially stark distinction between countercultural rebellion, on the one hand, and the commercial marketplace, on the other. Postmodern co-optation theorists will always be haunted by their inability to step out of the paradox of countercultural rebellion as hip bourgeois consumerism. Both existing co-optation theories conceptualize the co-optation process historically as a unidirectional move toward commercialization. In contradistinction, our alternative theorization of the co-optation process shows that marketplace dramas harbor powerful contradictions linked to diverse market interests. These contradictions provide points of ideological instability that motivate alternative calculations about price-value relationships that, in turn, set the stage for alternative market innovations. We develop co-optation as an open-ended marketplace power struggle that unfolds in dramatic cycles over four acts of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration. Together, these findings place co-optation at the heart of marketplace change, understood as a co-evolutionary dynamic between a dramatic market narrative and marketplace structure.

### “Countervailing Market Responses to Corporate Co-optation and the Ideological Recruitment of Consumption Communities

*Craig Thompson & Gokcen Coskuner-Balli*

What a long strange trip it has been. Over the course of three decades, organic foods—a totem of the 1960’s anti-establishment, anti-corporate, anti-conformist, counterculture—have become staple items for trendy upscale retailers like *Whole Foods* and widely

distributed through an array of premium priced brands. And now, Wal-Mart is pushing organic food further into the consumer mainstream. As Pollan (2006, p. 16) reports, “Wal-Mart plans to roll out a complete selection of organic foods — food certified by the U.S.D.A. to have been grown without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers — in its nearly 4,000 stores. Just as significant, the company says it will price all this organic food at an eye-poppingly tiny premium over its already-cheap conventional food.”

From a conventional theoretical standpoint, the corporatization of the organic food movement is merely another chapter in the ongoing saga of countercultural co-optation at the hands of corporate capitalism. A key premise of co-optation theory is that the capitalist marketplace transforms the symbols and practices of countercultural opposition into a constellation of trendy commodities and de-politicized fashion styles that are readily assimilated into the societal mainstream (Clarke 2003; Ewen 1988; Hebdige 1979). However, co-optation theory ascribes little or no potential for members of a counterculture to reclaim and re-politicize their co-opted symbols and practices.

For this reason, co-optation theory would not have predicted that the corporatization of organic food would have engendered a thriving countervailing market system—Community Supported Agriculture (hereafter CSA)—which has staked out a viable market niche for small, independent farmers by aggressively reasserting the countercultural values and ideals that originally animated the organic food movement. CSA widely promotes itself as an alternative to the organic foods now produced under the auspices of corporate conglomerates (Coleman 2002). Over 1500 CSA farms are now in operation throughout North America (Weise 2005).

In this presentation, we will first review the leading conceptualizations of corporate co-optation and highlight their theoretical omissions regarding the dynamics of countervailing market responses. Next, we explore the ways in which CSA has turned the corporate co-optation of the organic food movement to its own ideological advantage and, second, the alternative producer and consumer outlooks (and communal experiences) that are forged within these countervailing market-mediated relationships. We further explicate how this ideological inversion creates alignments between CSA farmers’ economic interests and CSA consumers’ perceptions of value. These ideological alignments are particularly interesting in the CSA case because this market system is designed to favor farmers’ economic interests while placing constraints on many taken-for-granted forms of consumer sovereignty.

Our formulation stands in theoretical contrast to classic co-optation theory which portrays the founding members of a counterculture as self-producers who create their own fashion styles and who exchange art and other cultural artifacts through informal gift economy networks. This version of the co-optation thesis is a tale of creeping commercialism which steadily erodes a counterculture’s subversive distinctiveness and the socio-political force of its symbolic protests (Clark 2003; Ewen 1988; Gladwell 1997; Hebdige 1979; Rushkoff and Barak 2001). We also challenge the hip consumer variation of co-optation theory which posits that a common ideological orientation (i.e., hip bourgeois consumerism) underlies the activities of both small countercultural entrepreneurs and multinational corporations who latter promote these aesthetic sensibilities to the commercial mainstream (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004).

By conceptualizing commercialism as a hegemon, social theorists will almost invariably reach the conclusion that a given counterculture has either been bought out (i.e., the classic co-optation thesis) or that it has always been part of the system capitalism (e.g., counterculture as hypocritical bourgeois affecta-

tion). Building on Sassen (2005), we contend that more nuanced analyses are needed to advance understanding of the structural relations, dialectical tensions, and ideological disjunctures that exist among the different market systems (and corresponding consumer orientations) that are situated within the global circuits of corporate capitalism. In this spirit, we contend that the corporate co-optation of a counterculture can generate countervailing markets. These markets are countervailing in the specific sense that they amplify, implement, and actively promote the countercultural principles, meanings, and ideals which have been attenuated by corporate co-optation. In contradistinction to classic co-optation theory, our formulation holds that countercultural identifications are fundamentally dependent upon the marketplace systems through which their defining values and ideals are materially represented. In responding to corporate co-optation, agents with vested interests in preserving and commercially cultivating these reclaimed countercultural meanings play a pivotal role in building a countervailing market by recruiting consumers to the (commercial) cause through a variety of entrepreneurial and potentially indoctrinating activities.

The key agents in this countervailing market system are food and farm activists who promote the CSA model through seminars and literature, CSA farmers, and more devoted consumer members who act as evangelists for their CSA farms and the CSA model in general.

Through participation in this alternative system of exchange relationships, the actions and perceptions of CSA farmers and consumers become ideologically aligned through ideals of rooted communities, morally and socially redemptive artisanship, and the refutation of commodity fetishism: the latter of which maps onto the nostalgically tinged meta-goal of protecting a sacrosanct social institution (the small independent farm) from economic extinction.

Critics who contend that the countercultural values are merely a hip guise for bourgeois consumerism would likely conclude that CSA consumers are paying a premium to gain a vaunted status distinction over the latte sipping, *Whole Foods* aesthetes or the cost-conscious shoppers who will stock up on organic foods at Wal-Mart superstores. Status-seeking may well indeed play a role in some consumers’ affinity for CSA. However, this explanation is insufficient because it ignores the ways in which this countervailing market provides an experientially compelling ideological alternative to the disembodied consumption communities engendered by the institutional structures of global corporate capitalism (Sassen 2005; Tomlinson 1999). This alternative ideological frame, and its corresponding mode of communal consumption experiences, enables CSA consumers to perceive the unconventional demands and transaction costs imposed by this countervailing market system as socially redeeming benefits.

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