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## The Hipster's Movement

By Camila Victoriano | September 28, 2014



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Hipsters. With their detached discontent and pseudo-vintage flannel shirts, they claim the spot as our era's most visible nonconformist subculture. They pair the grunge, beatnik, hippie, and rebel movements from past eras with protests against today's social norms. The hipster avoids chain coffee shops, frequents vintage stores, and checks her Facebook feed on her iPhone. But contrary to public opinion, hipsters also maintain a steady involvement in politics.

Photo credit [vintagelovv.tumblr.com](#)

Over the last few years, the media has denounced the hipster as an apathetic consumer, rather than celebrating her as a

politically conscious underground non-conformist. Instead of focusing on the passion behind the hipsters' social and political concerns, critics point to their niche consumerism and mock their sense of style.

But retrospect often blurs important realities. Revolutionary groups of the past, which hipsters love to admire, were not as pure in intent as remembered. In their own lifetime, groups like the b-boys were perceived as punk kids to most, irrelevant and unimportant to mainstream culture. Similarly, people tend to dismiss hipsters as apathetic and commercialized, ignoring some of their distinctly political values.

### What Coolness Movement?

Peter Furia, a founder of Seedwell Digital Creative Studio, defines hipsters as a group of people "who value independent thinking, counter-culture, progressive politics, an appreciation of art and indie-rock, creativity, intelligence, and witty banter." Ironically, they voice their counter-culture attitudes chiefly through technology, a leading force in mainstream culture. However, hipsters also act upon these aspirations through how they live their daily lives and through participating in different social and political movements.

The rise of the Internet has made it harder for the hipster to retain his authenticity in the eyes of others. Because hipsters scorn the "hipster" label, they instead form online communities based on their interests and common causes. Oftentimes, these causes are framed as anti-cultures and an anti-movements. Jason Kaufman, former sociology professor at Harvard, told the HPR that hipsters have an unusual and unspoken mindset: "I'm so cool that I'm above saying I'm a member of any kind of coolness movement."

According to Kaufman, such an attitude both "destabilizes [their] political potential" and defines their purpose. It's especially common to see hipsters promote political protests on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, the most popular methods of communication amongst modern society, where popular hashtags about issues and opinions can begin to trend and spread to other audiences.

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For example, the Occupy movement’s [Twitter](#) page consistently posts Tweets about the [green movement](#), [feminism](#), and [philosophy](#). Tweets that begin, “What’s up occupiers?” or “Yo Ferguson protestors...” are typical demonstrations of hipster politics. The casual tone, and the use of “occupier” or “protester” rather than calling out hipsters as a group, supposes authenticity.

Hipsters, limited by their lack of unity, speak more like separate, but like-minded, individuals. Social media sites are a key feature of the millennial lifestyle. This proves both good and bad for hipsters: a larger public now has access to the hipster’s cause, yet, as Kaufman says, “Just like anything else in social media, some [hipster movements] take hold and go viral...and the majority go nowhere.”

But even movements that do go viral can later be mocked and criticized by the media as high-tech narcissism. Hipsters who search for “personal liberation and self-discovery through technology,” as Kaufman puts it, are also known to use that same space for legitimate activism. The [#freethenipple campaign](#), which protested Instagram’s decency laws, was countered by accusations that the whole movement was merely a publicity stunt, for example.

People focus specifically on hipsters’ reliance on technology to suggest that their search for authenticity is empty of any real meaning. But this distinction between technology and real life can be misleading, at times. Can it really be that all things technological are by default inauthentic? Social media tools have been used to great effect in other political movements; why not with hipsters?

Hipsters and contemporary social protest come hand in hand. Photo credit thethreewisemonkeys.com.

The common answer to this question, of course, is that successful protests must move from the computer screen to the streets in some direct way, and that personal

lifestyles should not conflict with the message of the protests. In a 2011 [Washington Post article](#), Alexandra Petri highlights the irony that hipsters protest inequality while with iPhones in their hands and Macs in their homes. But she dismisses this critique: “to suggest that you can protest only if you divest yourself of all corporate trappings would be ridiculous.”

Even with that defense in mind, it’s very true that many hipsters speak from positions of privilege. But I would argue that this privilege is at least put to good use, whether or not they can fully empathize with the causes they represent. They have the ability to go to different points of conflict when the moment arises, from Occupy Wall Street to the protests in Ferguson, Missouri. There, they use their smartphones to spread messages through social media, which in turn raises awareness for the cause.

This structure makes hipsters very touch-and-go. They don’t stay in any one place for long, and instead follow protests and issues as they pop up. Any large protest will attract people, hipsters or not, who may not fully understand the issue and the consequences of what is happening.

Hipsters, with their mass presence and tech-savvy way of spreading news, help to shed light on areas that need reform. People may see their departure as a failure or as a lack of commitment, but it is neither. The role of hipsters is to bring attention to an issue through social media so that specialized groups can take the next steps. They raise awareness, and then move on to the next project.

## Free People

Whether or not Internet-promoted hipster projects are impactful, the erratic behavior of the hipster movement is, according to Kaufman, “the nature of the world we live in right now. There’s so much input going into the social machine and really chaotic output.” Partially because of this overflow of issues, hipsters are often recognized not for their activism, but for the clothes they wear and the lifestyle choices they make. And yet, we should not discount the fact that these ostensibly apolitical acts can still affect the mainstream in unexpected ways.

In “[Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization](#),” Douglas Haddow argues that hipsters are concerned with “consuming cool rather than creating it.” But the consumption of cool may be a by-product, not a real characteristic, of the counter-culture. In recent years, the fashion industry realized the marketing potential of the hipster. Many clothing companies, with help from social media, noted the fashion trends that hipsters were bringing back as

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symbols of counter-culture and coolness. These companies then made a social movement suddenly accessible to everyone.

Now, some of the most popular stores for teens and young adults are Urban Outfitters, Free People, and American Apparel. While these stores still maintain basic clothing items, they mainly evoke subculture sentiments by selling clothes that look “authentic,” that is, thrifted or hippie or grunge. The fashion trend seems to have consumed most of the political motivations of hipsters and earned the disdain of so-called “authentic” hipsters. Focus on image has engendered “passive activism”: Instead of participating in movements, people are Instagramming pictures of them.

Past social movements have had posers and fakers, too. As Kaufman says, “any social scene has different types of people in it.” Instead of taking that reality into account, however, Haddow says that hipsterdom “is the end product of all countercultures” because it takes so much superficial content from the past. Haddow believes that “it’s been stripped of its subversion and originality” and, ultimately, signals the end of Western civilization.

Yet the problems that Haddow points out aren’t unique to hipsters. Contemporary society itself is a world of paradoxes created by social media: being the most connected to each other and yet the most detached. It’s hard to free oneself from technology. In an attempt to vocalize a lifestyle they truly believed in, hipsters instead garnered a following that, for the most part, only cared about appearances. Technology encourages this focus on the superficial by promoting identities based on “likes” and by giving people so much information to process that they rarely ever focus strongly enough on a single issue.

In this way, the hipster movement has universalized. People may continue to fight for environmentalism, urban farming, authenticity, and organic food, but it’s no longer connected to hipsters alone. These ideals are now part of a general society that longs, perhaps without taking much action, for an authenticity defined by non-conformism. Yet the promotion of these issues will continue to be led by the core group of true hipsters that use their place of privilege as a source for modern political activism.

Image credit: Flickr / Dan Nguyen

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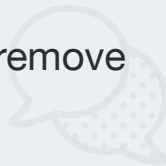


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a month ago

Setting aside appropriation, which has always been a large aspect of white counter culture, nothing says individualism like conforming to aesthetic norms i.e. beards and tattoos.

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Miro23

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[Peter Furia, a founder of Seedwell Digital Creative Studio, defines hipsters as a group of people “who value independent thinking, counter-culture, progressive politics.....”]

This a is a contradiction in terms, the raison d'être of CCP ( Counter Cultural Progressivism) is to crush independent thinking.

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seandemery

3 years ago

I liked this post. It shows once again that movements based on a specific ideology get diluted and become more popular as a fashion statement rather than a philosophy or political movement. This happens again and again through the annals of times.

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Too bad this piece didn't lead with its conclusion about "true hipsters using their privilege" - that would have spared everyone to bother reading the rest.

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Sick of this

4 years ago

I dont know about all that. To me it just looks like jerks putting other people they dont know down based on how the dress. Enough already.

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