

“Subbacultcha:” Gender Roles in the Punk Subculture

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Final Research Project: Unobtrusive Method/Content Analysis

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INTRODUCTION:

In a world that runs on social conformity, one group of individuals strives to do the opposite. Punks openly abandon social norms in search of a more genuine reality based on free thinking. The punk subculture, however, is still subject to the same effects of group-thinking and eventually ends in conformity (Griffith 2012). In a study by Paull and Morris (2008), punks were even seen to conform faster than the “mainstream” participants, suggesting that the group is subject to negative group-thinking as well. In an attempt to better understand “punk” and the way the subculture thinks, this study aims to analyze “how gender roles are represented in punk subculture through clothing/attire and other external elements of physical appearance as seen in photographs of punk men and women found in the *Flickr* photo archive, *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)*.”

Punk culture is one of social deviance and the desire to reclaim characteristics deemed “ugly” by society. The mainstream culture in America is one of patriarchy and oppression of anything feminine. This leads to the assumption that gender roles in punk culture would oppose patriarchy in favor of a more gender equal, if not matriarchal ideology. However, punk culture began as another male driven aspect of society and perpetuated the patriarchal ideals of the mainstream, but because of its roots in social deviance, punk women found it as a viable avenue to have their voices heard.

The study of gender roles in subgroups helps us understand how sects of society can be influenced differently than others, and the study of deviant groups is important in understanding social movement and progression. Therefore researching punk gender roles is relevant when studying the progression of women in society and ultimately sheds light on gender roles in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Gender roles have been a crucial subject of research for as long as social research has existed. The interaction and individual characteristics of men and women drives society and exists throughout all aspects of society. Looking at gender roles in subculture groups gives a representation of how these groups affect and are effected by the mainstream.

Although the punk subculture guises itself in a cloak of individualism, gender inequality and oppression still exists. The following includes previous research on gender roles in specifically the punk subculture and analyzes the research to find “how gender roles are portrayed through attire/fashion in the punk subculture as seen in *American Punk/Hardcore* (78-91)”

Punk Hegemony

Punk music is generally characterized by anti-mainstream efforts and a reclamation of what was corrupted by society. Gender is one of those corrupted aspects of society that in many ways punk tries to rework, however, the subculture still finds itself susceptible to the influence of hegemonic masculinity. Primarily a white, boys’ culture, punk focuses mostly on masculinity which in turn perpetuates the hegemonic idea of women as passive (Bolen 2012). According to

Griffith (2012), this is less on purpose and more ironically a result of punk men challenging the hegemonic masculine ideals regarding sexuality, physical ability, and emotions.

Although this hegemonic opposition creates a safer space for women free of displays of excessive masculinity, the space excludes women and functions, rather, as a sort of club for non-hegemonic men (Griffith 2012). In fact, punk men fared well when challenging hegemonic masculinity as seen in Downes' (2012) example in which the band, the "New York Dolls," cross-dressed as a sort of social-experiment and yet their "heterosexual privilege" and general masculinity remained unaffected. Conversely, punk women that dawn men's clothing are met with opposition (Cognan and Downes 2012).

Girls Don't Sell

Cognan (2012) believes that corporate America actually had something to do with women's difficult time with acceptance into the punk culture. Although the music initially acted as a countermovement away from commercialism and toward do-it-yourself (DIY) endeavors, punk was still commercial. Punk artists still had to sell records and women, sadly, are not as marketable in regards to punk music (Cognan 2012).

Despite being "un-marketable," the all-girl punk-band, "The Slits," formed in 1976 at the front-end of the punk revolution, were met with relative success, and joined similar girl punk-outfits in an attempt to reform the gender inequality in the British punk scene. Punk music was a great opportunity for female musicians because of its simple song structure and emphasis on "do-it-yourself," which allowed female punk bands to quickly form regardless of skill level, and gave them places to play where their voices could be heard (Berkers 2012). In an attempt to make punk more accessible, The Slits incorporated dub reggae styles into their music (Cognan 2012.)

This adoption of Caribbean style became influential to punk culture and also gave black punks somewhat of a voice.

Discrimination

Black punks had an especially difficult time in the white male driven subculture, and were often written off as “pseudo-punks” by whites while blacks considered them to be abandoning their roots (McGraw 2012). Punk eventually turned the fashionable skin-head movement of the late 1960’s into the violent, racist problem it is known as today (McGraw 2012). Therefore, when looking into punk culture, it consists mostly of white men and women where men have more power and minorities are generally pushed out.

Generally, according to Cognan (2012), women are also rejected from the subculture, however these women aim to use punk to their advantage. Punk is a culture that allows for counteraction against oppression even if punk men oppress punk women. Punk women get involved with the scene to escape what Bolen (2001) refers to as the “femininity game.” Mainstream culture allows for little fluidity for women, so even if women are forced to endure masculine oppression within the punk culture, they are rewarded with the freedom of choice (Bolen 2001).

Tattoos, piercings, and clothing have all been used in punk music to differentiate from the mainstream. In regards to women, these items have been used to overcome the passive, weak, feminine stereotype and combat the hegemonic idea of femininity (Griffith 2012). According to Griffith (2012), this presents the issue of pressure within the female punk community to “look more punk” in order to combat hegemonic masculinity, but in reality is just “conforming to nonconformity.”

As punk developed through the 1980's, punk women were just as much punk as they were second-wave feminists (Berkers 2012). Out of the 80's, "Riot Grrrl" emerged in the 1990's as a social movement to combat the hegemonic oppression of girls inside and outside of punk music. It has been referred to as an "expansion of punk rock" and continues to fight for women's rights in a hegemonic-masculine culture.

The punk subculture is rather contradictory. Although the scene claims an individualistic identity, the only individuals that seem to not fight oppression within the subgroup are white men. This may be due to white, punk men's struggle against mainstream hegemonic masculinity. Women's role in punk culture continues to grow with the help of movements like "Riot Grrrl" however the inclusion of ethnic minority groups is still not common.

DATA & METHODS:

This study aims to describe "how gender roles are portrayed in "punk" men and women in photos from *Flickr* photo archive, *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)*." Photographs were chosen for analysis as to not disrupt natural social action, and allow for analysis of past and present punks. I conducted an unobtrusive content analysis in which I analyzed pictures of punks from *Flickr* photo archive, *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)*. Because punk culture has existed since the late 1970s, I included images from as far back as 1977, but due to punk's persistence as a subculture, it would be negligent to not include punks from every era (1970s, 1980s, 1990s), and therefore I included pictures through 1992, as well as at least one punk man and woman in 2015. As to remain within my ethical boundaries, I analyzed only public photographs.

Flickr is user-driven website where users can upload, view, and organize photos. Users range from inexperienced to professional photographers, which creates a broad, but organic, scope of photography. *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)* is a photo archive administered by “Allison/Savage Pink” and contains 2.1 thousands photos of punks from hundreds of uploaders, and ranges from dates in 1977 to 2015 with most photos falling within the 1978-91 range. The oldest photo in my sample is from 1977 and the most recent is from 2015.

I utilized systematic random sampling as to ensure that my sample was representative of punks from all decades. This was done by randomly selecting photos of men and women, noting the date, and avoiding photos with a date that was used twice. When a sample of 20 men and 20 women was finally collected, the photos were split into groups according to sex, where men were indicated by the letter “M” followed by a number one through twenty, and women were indicated by the letter “F” followed by a number one through twenty.

I then created two identical worksheets containing three categories: feminine, masculine, and gender fluid. The feminine category was divided into 5 sub-categories that represent feminine codes/traits: pierced ears, jewelry, make-up, long hair, and tight/feminine clothing. The masculine category contained 5 masculine codes/traits: shirtless, aggressive clothing, jackets, short hair, and loose/masculine clothing. Aggressive clothing was defined as having metal spikes, chains, and/or profanity. Finally, the gender fluid category was split into 3 explicitly gender fluid codes/traits: torn clothing, tattoos, and non-traditional hairstyles (e.g. mohawks, liberty-spikes, semi-shaved). One worksheet was used to analyze the 20 men, and the other was used to analyze the 20 women.

Analysis was executed by examining the men and women in the photos and inputting their associated number next to the code/trait exhibited by their attire and/or physical appearance.

Numbering the photos ensured that no pictures were neglected, as well as gave insight into which photo contained each code/trait. Creating codes/sub-categories for the masculinity, femininity, and fluidity categories permitted some photos to satisfy a main category more than once, and gave a more accurate representation of how the cultural dimensions are generally mixed to create gender fluidity. The number of cases associated with each code/trait was then added up and the total was written next to the main category. These totals were used to directly compare/contrast the presence/absence of certain traits between men and women, and were also made into proportions for comparison within each sex group. Finally, I identified three themes based on the content.

Although content analysis is unobtrusive, generally, pictures of punks found online were not accurately representative of the actual population, and were difficult to find, many of which not including “everyday punks.” However, user-driven photography hosting websites, such as *Flickr* act as a database for photographs with publication information and dates. Despite initially difficulty finding accurate depictions of punk men and women, *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)* allowed for a competent and representative content analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The purpose of this study was to explore “how ‘punk’ gender roles are portrayed through fashion and physical attributes of punk men and women as seen in photos from *Flickr* photo archive, *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)*.” I randomly selected 40 “public use” photos (20 men and 20 women), and gave each photo a corresponding number as seen in the appendix. It is notable that there were only photos of Caucasian people and a few Hispanic people in the entire

photo archive, as this confirms the previously discussed notion that the punk subculture does not welcome racial minorities. The photos were analyzed by noting exhibited fashion or physical traits as feminine, masculine, or fluid. The sample aims to equally represent punk men and women across a span of 13 years, and includes at least one man and woman from 2015 as to include modern punks. Analyzing how gender roles are portrayed in photographs of punks gives insight to into how counter-culture sub groups either accept, reject, or adapt social norms. The findings of my analysis answer “how punk gender roles are portrayed through fashion and physical attributes as seen in photos of punk men and women found in *Flickr* photo archive, *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)*.”

After reviewing the photos, I noticed three major themes associated with the content. (1) Men both oppose and perpetuate hegemonic masculine ideas; (2) Women generally reject the classic (hegemonic) feminine appearance; (3) Gender fluid fashion permeates both sexes nearly equally. Each theme is discussed further below in order to better understand gender roles in the punk subculture.

Pretty Tough Pretty Boys

Theme 1: Men both oppose and perpetuate hegemonic identities

As represented by my sample of photos, punk men equally favor feminine and masculine traits. I reported 33 masculine traits, 31 feminine traits, and only 13 gender fluid traits. This menial difference between masculine and feminine traits indicates that punk men do not favor either, however, the respective traits still fit into hegemonic boxes. Masculinity is represented by

aggressiveness and, as seen in photo M5, the phallus, whereas femininity is depicted as passive and pretty (Savage 2005).

While the adoption of hegemonic feminine traits by men appropriates the label, but does not change its meaning, the emergence of gender fluid traits such as mohawks and tattoos are not subject to hegemonic influence. Torn clothing, while seemingly aggressive, acts as gender fluid trait, and opposes the universal hegemonic idea that one should be presentable. "Normal" clothes are destroyed, making torn clothing a bastardization of what is acceptable. The punk men in the archive perpetuate hegemonic masculinity through traits that exhibit aggression such as metal spikes, chains, and curse words on clothing. These traits allude to violence and solidify the hegemonic idea that men are to be aggressive and strong.

Another exhibition of hegemonic strength is the lack of a shirt. Male shirtlessness highlights the male physique and aims to show strength, and one-fourth of the analyzed men were shirtless. Shirtlessness, is generally reserved for men and frowned upon with women. This suggests that male shirtlessness in the punk subculture is a demonstration of power, dominance, and a reminder that women are not equal. Similarly, a shaved head represents masculinity, although women are more capable of shaving their head without extreme opposition both inside and outside of the subculture. Surprisingly, there were no photos of men or women with shaved heads in my sample.

Conversely, punk men appear to equally reject hegemonic ideas of masculinity. However, the ideas rejected mostly benefit men who were originally opposed by a hegemonic masculine system. The feminine traits they adopt remain feminine according to hegemonic standards, but the appropriation of these feminine traits by men creates a radical opposition to hegemonic masculinity by entertaining femininity. Long hair, tight clothing, make-up, jewelry and pierced

ears were seen on the analyzed men, and the presence of these traits seemed to separate them from the hegemonic masculine identity.

The majority of the analyzed men with earrings wore small loops that were hardly noticeable, however, a few men wore feminine, dangly earrings, usually accompanied by makeup. Traits such as the small earrings suggested that these punk men are breaking down gender barriers but are afraid of opposition, whereas the openly feminine men actually looked feminine, suggesting that they did not fear hegemonic opposition.

The feminine traits did not appear to be adapted to be redefined as masculine, although, within the sample, feminine traits such as fishnets were combined with masculine traits such as shirtlessness in an attempt to bridge the gap between masculine and feminine. Photo M5 shows a man in torn fishnet leggings, with long hair and studded underwear exposing both his chest and penis. The combination of feminine clothes and hair with the obvious expression of masculinity through the exposition of the bare chest and penis is neither distinctly masculine nor feminine and exemplifies the gender fluidity that resists hegemonic influence. Feminine traits adopted by punk men are not consequently masculine, but, instead, are feminizing, yet the exhibition of feminine traits in the photographs solidifies the notion of hegemonic opposition by men.

Girls Are “Ugly”

Theme 2: Women generally reject the classic (hegemonic) feminine appearance.

While feminine and masculine traits were nearly equally represented for men, the punk women exhibited 61 feminine traits, 29 masculine traits, and 11 gender fluid traits. The number of masculine and gender fluid traits differed only slightly from men. Women portrayed only four

fewer feminine traits and two fewer masculine and gender fluid traits, suggesting that women are adopting masculine traits to reject hegemonic femininity. However, the reported 61 feminine traits indicate that punk women are actually dressing more femininely than masculine, although the women in the analyzed photos were not particularly girly. The traditionally feminine traits include pierced ears, jewelry, make-up, long hair, and tight/feminine clothing, yet the women analyzed generally exhibited these traits abnormally.

As stated previously regarding male appropriation of feminine traits, male exhibition of femininity by punk men did not redefine “feminine.” Punk women, on the contrary, attempt to redefine femininity by bastardizing classic, hegemonic ideas of femininity, such as the notion that women are fragile, weak, passive, pretty, and clean. This bastardization was portrayed in the photos through the use of making “pretty” things “ugly” and by combining feminine traits with masculine ones. Most of the women analyzed generally wore dark lipstick and exaggerated eye make-up, as to take something classically pretty and make it ugly. Three women wore no make-up at all in a similar attempt to combat the idea that women are to be pretty. With the exception of a few, women with long hair generally cut it asymmetrically as to look different from the long, pretty, mainstream haircuts. The remaining women sported short, spikey hair or a more gender fluid mohawk/semi-shaved haircut.

The observed women combined feminine traits with masculine traits, generating an image that was neither masculine nor feminine. Either traditional or bastardized feminine traits were combined with masculine traits like aggressive clothing/accessories, loose clothing, short hair, and jackets. 5 women are seen in leather jackets which are worn in some combination with other feminine article of clothing, usually tight clothing. Short spikey hair, mohawks, and semi-shaved, and other non-traditional hairstyles help to defeminize traditionally feminine attire, as do

aggressive accessories. Masculine spiked collars, belts, or bracelets were worn by 8 of the 20 women, and were always worn in combination with some feminine trait. The combination of masculine and feminine traits essentially results in confusion. While the masculine and feminine traits may be individually hegemonic, integrating both kind of traits blurs the line between them and makes them more difficult to define.

Let's Meet in the Middle

Theme 3: Gender fluid fashion permeates both sexes nearly equally.

Both the men and women in the photos I analyzed portrayed almost the same number of gender fluid traits, as represented by the presence of a tattoos, torn clothing, and mohawks, liberty-spikes, and semi-shaved hairstyles. Tattoos are classically a cultural taboo regardless of gender, and thus act as a gender fluid trait. Similarly, torn clothing is generally viewed as dirty, poor, and undesirable, and non-traditional hairstyles such as mohawks, liberty-spikes, and other semi-shaved hairstyles are difficult to place in traditional masculine and feminine boxes.

11 of the 20 women and 10 of the 20 men in the analysis exhibited at least one gender fluid trait. Each gender fluid trait was combined with either masculine, feminine, or both traits to initiate actual gender fluidity. The gender fluid traits I noted could not be exclusively defined as feminine or masculine, but were not the only indicator of fluidity. In fact, gender fluidity is evident in the majority of the analyzed photos through the integration of masculine and feminine traits regardless of the presence of an explicitly gender fluid trait. Of the explicitly gender fluid traits, torn clothing and non-tradition hair was the most common.

Non-traditional hair made it difficult at times to determine men from women, because there are not gendered versions of the hairstyles. During analysis, it was noticeable that the non-traditional styles portrayed, themselves, appeared to be a combination of femininity and masculinity through the simultaneous integration of short and long hair.

Torn pants were the most common article of extremely torn clothing, but t-shirts and jackets sported wear and tear as well. Tattoos were actually rare with only one woman and two men having them, however, the style was consistent.

Tattoos were generally small and appeared to not exceed five inches, but men had significantly more tattoos, many of which were exposed solely because of shirtlessness. Whether it be by the combination of gender identities or the exhibition of an explicitly gender fluid trait, the punks in my analysis generally feature gender fluid appearances.

CONCLUSIONS:

This content analysis focused on “how gender roles are represented in punk subculture through clothing/attire and other external elements of physical appearance as seen in photographs of punk men and women found in the *Flickr* photo archive, *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)*.” Analysis of the 40 photos of punk men and women revealed three themes supported by elements of appearance as evidence.

The first theme is the simultaneous opposition and perpetuation of hegemonic identities by the men in the photos. Half the men maintained an aggressive, strong, hegemonic masculine appearance, while the remaining half dressed in contrast to hegemonic ideas with earrings and

torn clothing being the most common examples of deviance. The men in my sample presented punk men as equally masculine and feminine.

The second theme is the rejection of hegemonic femininity by punk women. As seen in the 20 photos of women sampled, punk women do not merely move existing hegemonic identities around, they attempt to change and reclaim them. For example, the bastardization of classically feminine and pretty things such as fishnet leggings being torn and make-up worn excessively (or not at all) suggest that the women in the sample are swapping the hegemonic ideas of femininity as pretty and dainty with more realistic ideas of femininity as dirty and human.

The final theme was the equal permeation of gender fluid fashion seen in *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)*. Both sexes were seen to exhibit explicitly gender fluid codes/traits, but fluidity was mostly achieved through the combination of masculine and feminine codes/traits. The individual gender identities were not necessarily redefined, but the combination made it difficult to explicitly define some individuals as masculine or feminine. Thus, many of the men and women in the photos appeared somewhat gender fluid.

Hegemonic gender ideas soak many aspects of society, even deviant groups. The punk subculture is not immune to the effects of hegemonic thinking regardless of its apparent opposition to tradition. However, punk is male driven subculture and hegemonic ideas of masculinity as aggressive, powerful, and violent are found throughout, and punk women, as well as other minorities in subculture, are forced to work around these social obstacles. As seen in the photo sample, punk women attempt to redefine femininity even if it means adopting hegemonic masculine traits.

Nothing is perfect, including the punk opposition to social norms. However, deviant groups like punks illuminate the option to think freely. Although hegemony still influences the punk subculture, evidence from photos of men and women in *American Punk/Hardcore (78-91)* suggests a strong aversion to hegemony and gives hope for future gender equality.

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