From underground cultural boundaries in nineties to fluid networks at present. The context of youth (sub)cultural identities in Estonia

AIRI-ALINA ALLASTE, MAARJA KOBIN

Institute of International and Social Studies, Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
E-mail: alina@iiss.ee

Younger generations in Estonia are involved into global cultural trends that exert increasing influence on their lives and identity formation. Even though youth cultural trends are nowadays global, they are also closely related to the local culture and historical background of their different societies. Subcultural trends adopted in Estonia have been altered in the process of their diffusion and their internal structure and relationship to society at large are influenced by the smallness of the country, its Soviet background and its lack of social classes.

This paper focuses on the diffusion of global youth cultural trends – club culture and hip-hop culture – in Estonia and the construction of (sub)cultural identity from a micro-sociological perspective. The diffusion of trends is divided into four periods: esoteric, underground, mainstream and WEB2, and cultural identity is analysed in these periods with respect to changes in society as well as the underground scene. The starting point for our analysis is that identity is relational, fluid and comparative.

The empirical part of the paper relies on participant observation and open-ended interviews with young people who participate in club culture (collected in 1998–2002 and 2010) and hip-hop culture (collected in 2007–2008).

Key words: subcultural identity, diffusion of subcultural trends, Estonia

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 1990s, after the collapse of Soviet Union and the restoration of Estonia's independence, the nation reoriented itself towards the Western world. The younger generation started to integrate into the international youth culture and adopted its prevailing individualistic-hedonistic value orientations. Young people began to produce their own local constructions of global cultures: cultural identities which were created in relation to globally widespread culture, on the one hand, and the local context, on the other. Most of the youth cultural trends in Estonia are adopted from outside and have been somewhat altered in the process of their diffusion. We have opted to use the term 'subcultural trend' instead of 'subculture', finding it more appropriate in the Estonian case, as it refers to the adoption of a global trend.

This article[1] aims to give a sense of the development of and changes in international youth cultural trends in a cultural periphery – Estonia – in recent decades. It also aims to

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[1] The article is part of research project ETF7331 *Youth Subcultures and Lifestyles in Estonia. Where does the boundary between distinctive and deviant behaviour lie?*

analyse the changes in cultural identities, synchronically paying attention to changes in (sub) cultural trends and their position in society. The term 'subcultural identity' refers here to an identity connected to subcultural trend through internalisation of attitudes, norms and preferences in crowd, music and style. We are aware that contemporary identities tend to be multiple and overlapping. Other possible identities of the same participants, such as personal identity developed in relation to 'significant others' or social identity developed via internalisation of specific obligations, privileges and rights that define the position of an individual in the social system (Johansson, Miegel 1992), are not in the focus of this article.

THEORETICAL APPROACH TO SUBCULTURES AND IDENTITIES

The theoretical language of subculture has been widely discussed in recent decades. Earlier schools in subcultural studies – Chicago school from the first half of the twentieth century and Birmingham school from 1970s – approached subcultures as oppositional to mainstream culture and society. In Chicago school, the main question was collective solutions to structural conditions by using the ethnographical approach which gave a detailed description of subculturalists' everyday lives. In CCCS[2], scholars used the concepts of hegemony, structuralism and semiotics as a set of grounding premises for the study of a variety of working-class youth formations (Williams 2011). Although the subcultural theories of the Birmingham school – which tended to treat subcultures as symbolic solutions of the working class youth to ideological contradictions in their parent culture (Clarke 1976; Hebdige 1979) – have met some criticism since their emergence in the seventies, the first alternatives were only developed in the nineties employing a postmodern approach. Post-subcultural theory takes into account modern theories of individualisation, the fragmentation of previous forms of society and the expansion of consumer culture. It argues that in the contemporary world subculture is rather a distinctive form of consumption, which gives to the individual a more extensive freedom of choice (Bennett 2011; Muggleton 2000).

Belonging to subcultures is, according to previous literature, often connected to distinctive music, style and subcultural ideologies (Hebdige 1979). 'Subcultural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of undifferentiated mass' (Thornton 1995: 10). When approaching collective identity in this article, we adopt the deconstructionist approach, which emphasises the impossibility of authentic identities based on a universally shared experience or origin; identities are relational, defined by their difference from something, processual, and multiple (Grossberg 1996). In the post-subcultural approach, the 'subcultural other' often signifies the reference group in relation to which the members of the subculture authenticate themselves. The group's identities are easier to legitimate through ideology that involves confrontation with other groups that are considered to have poor taste or no taste at all (Muggleton 2000). As the borders between insiders and outsiders are rather unclear, the concept of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) facilitates the analysis of subcultural identities.

This article describes how historical background and local conditions have influenced the adoption of two subcultural trends in Estonia, and how the notions of 'underground' and 'mainstream,' and 'metropolis' and 'periphery', and meanings which are given to authenticity

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[2] The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was a research centre at the University of Birmingham, England; also known as the Birmingham School.

have changed over time. Our aim is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of young people's lives and explain how cultural identity is connected to other aspects of their lives or analyse all segments of young people in Estonia. The main focus is on the formation of subcultural identity that depends on the stage of subculture.

METHODS

The research methods of this study include open-ended interviews and participant observation, which means attending parties and other events relevant to the two youth cultures under investigation in order to create a broader context for the interpretation of the interviews.

Interviews with clubbers were mostly conducted in 1998–2002 in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Twenty-eight interviews were carried out with 16- to 32-year-old respondents (19 males and 9 females). Three additional interviews were carried out in 2010 – one with an established DJ who has been on the scene for 20 years and two with newcomers. Interviews with followers of the hip-hop culture were conducted in 2007–2008 in Rakvere – a small provincial town in Northern Estonia. Sixteen interviews were conducted with 18- to 28-year-old respondents. Similarly to the hip-hop culture in the USA and elsewhere, the subculture is male-dominated (Androutsopoulos, Scholz 2003) – virtually all respected leaders and artists are male, therefore most of the informants were male and only two females were interviewed.

The analysis was conducted using open coding – in accordance with the subjects that emerged from the material. The coding was performed with the aim of identifying central topics and forming relevant categories. All statements are based on analysis of all materials, and quotations are used to illustrate the arguments.

The diffusion process of club culture and hip-hop culture is divided into four periods constructed on the basis of the interviews. Even though participants are mostly from Tallinn (in the case of club culture) and Rakvere (hip-hop), the trends are characteristic to the development of the respective subcultures in Estonia in general. This analytic tool is specific to this article[3]; it describes the development of two subcultural trends in a specific context and is not necessarily applicable to the development of other subcultures elsewhere.

Club Culture and Hip-hop Culture

Club culture (originally called 'acid house' culture and also known as 'rave culture') was introduced by UK citizens partying in Ibiza in 1987 (Thornton 1995). It gained popularity quite quickly, first in the United Kingdom and later in other European countries. In Estonia, the new youth culture was completely unknown until the beginning of the 1990s. Hip-hop culture was born in New York, USA in the 1970s as a reaction to the social injustice experienced by marginalised black ghetto youth (Rose 2005). In the following decade, hip-hop became very popular, spread beyond New York and is now commonplace among youth worldwide (Androutsopoulos, Scholz 2003; Mitchell 1996). Hip-hop culture arrived in Estonia after the restoration of the nation's independence.

The Esoteric Period

Our starting point is two decades ago, when youth cultural trends were mostly born in metropolises and later spread to cultural peripheries. As each locality is either a centre or a

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[3] Similar categories (without the last period) were first used in Salasuo & Allaste 2003.

periphery in relation to some other locality (Kjeldgaard 2003), our definition here assumes that Western popular culture is centred in Western European and American cities and that Estonia remained outside of it in the Soviet time and has stood on its borders in recent decades.

Before 1991, Estonia was part of the Soviet Union, and everyday life during this period encompassed quite homogeneous values and tastes; Western hedonistic lifestyles were locked behind the Iron Curtain[4]. With the regaining of Estonian independence, the social, cultural, political and structural situation changed, allowing for the diffusion of different global cultural practices, many of which young people perceived as attractive and glamorous. Western culture had become more easily accessible through media and tourism; however, information about these cultures was limited, superficial and sometimes naive. One way to claim independence from parents and make life more exciting was to pretend to adopt the supposedly wild, Western lifestyles – in the context of hip-hop this involved 'living a ghetto life.'

> Mihkel (25, 2008):[5]
> "It was in 1994 or 1995, when the guys used to hang around with boom boxes. It was so cool to have a gang or a bunch of guys for everything to be so dangerous. We fantasised – from movies and all the rest – that we were such tough rappers, gangs and things."

At the very beginning, being authentic meant that young people who followed subcultural trends in Estonia, a cultural periphery, tried to copy the respective Western subculture as closely as possible. At first, Estonian hip-hop artists only performed in English (see also Easton 1989; Pilkington 1994), since this was associated with authentic hip-hop at the time. Young people also wanted to be more Western or global, and English symbolised Western culture (Bennett 1999) and did not evoke the Soviet time.

In the first period in Estonia, events that comprised only one music style were almost completely non-existent. Young people may have preferred a particular style, but they had limited opportunities for the organisation of events involving their favourite music alone. Because of these structural conditions, subcultural identity was not based purely on a specific musical style, but rather on proximity – spending time together, identifying with people who held similar beliefs, who shared norms, who were perceived as like oneself and whose presence evoked positive feelings. Identification was based on the desired cultural practices on a global level and distinctions from Soviet practices on a local level. In club culture a different way of partying – without excessive drinking, violence or sexual content – was emphasised. Hip-hop emphasised authentic self-expression, something which was neither accessible nor allowed in the Soviet time.

Immediate and spontaneous participation in many aspects of youth cultures was not possible as the Estonian society was not integrated with the rest of the world; also Estonia could not be characterized as 'market of styles' at the beginning of nineties. Young people at that time had to cope with the lack of choice and Estonia at that time can be characterized by

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[4] The Iron Curtain was the dividing line between Soviet Communist-controlled Central and Eastern Europe and Western democratic Europe for more than four decades in the mid-twentieth century. It was one of the most powerful geographical barriers in continental Europe, and it provided a most enduring political dividing line until the implosion of Soviet Union in 1989/90 (Blacksell, 2006: 54).

[5] In quotations we have changed informants' names in order to preserve anonymity. All the names of informants from club culture start with the letter "K" and those from hip-hop with the letter "M". In brackets we have indicated the informant's age and the year in which the interview was conducted. The quotations used to illustrate our arguments are all from male informants therefore we have not specified gender.

a peripheral discourse which was based on what was not available – a lack of global products and symbols, as well as limited leisure opportunities (Kjeldgaard 2003). Subcultural identity symbolised distancing from the Soviet culture and becoming more Western or creating a feeling of belonging on a global level.

The Underground Period

The underground period is characterised by the establishment of subcultural trends and a greater variety of people following these trends at different levels. In the mid-nineties, commercial popular culture, which was relatively insignificant at the beginning of nineties, rapidly gained popularity at all levels in Estonia, becoming an easily recognisable phenomenon. In this period, young people who were involved in club culture or hip-hop scenes started to define themselves as differing from people who listened to mainstream popular music or attended events where it was played. Besides, borders between different subcultural trends became clearer. It became an important issue to explain the styles to which one did not belong, thereby also giving meaning to one's own position in relation to other subcultures (Kjeldgaard 2003).

> Mihkel (25, 2008):
> "But that was a time when rap was the coolest, the most awesome; you couldn't get anything cooler than that. "What are you listening to? Look what you look like". <...> The hairies [metal fans] were different, in principle, like day and night. They couldn't stand our music and we couldn't stand theirs."

In this period, trend followers can be characterised as openly emphasising known elements of subculture in their cultural practices. The latter became important as 'tools' for self-validation and identification with the subcultural style. In connection with this period, drugs, especially ecstasy, began to spread in the context of club culture and became sought-after among young clubbers.

> Kristjan (25, 2002):
> "Well, look, at that time [mid-1990s] it was like some kind of drug revolution, you know. Synchronised with Estonian independence and all that, there was, like, everything coming in, you know. DJing and stuff. It all had, like, some kind of power or some special aura and shine."

Visual style acquired huge importance in this period in the construction of subcultural identity in hip-hop. Clothes became a tool for demonstrating who 'we' are and who 'we' are not.

During this period, it is possible to distinguish between 'early adopters' (the original innovators) (Wolfe 1999) and newcomers (the second generation). Owing to the 'early adopters', the local scenes evolved and started to grow. Although it is claimed that they set the agenda for the behaviour and interaction of others by providing cues that define the range of acceptable behavioural norms (Wagner 1988), the next generation created a 'new culture' on their own. Different styles emerged and further distinction on the basis of style and generation became important.

> Kahro (19, 1998):
> "We're all together, drum'n'bass and gabber guys. We're, like, mainly against house."[6]

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[6] Drum'n'bass, gabber and house are different styles of electronic music.

Do you feel you can be identified as club people?

> Kaur (18, 1998):
> "No, we're absolutely different, we're younger, we're much younger."

According to Bourdieu's terminology, the emergence of a new style can be also interpreted as competition in the cultural field (Bourdieu 1993). As the younger generation did not have the opportunity or the necessary subcultural capital to compete with older DJs, artists, etc., they had to define a 'new culture' – music and style – in order to differentiate themselves. In club culture it is possible to identify the emergence of two subscenes: club culture and rave culture. In the case of hip-hop, artists began to rap in Estonian during this period and created a local version of gangsta rap.

The Mainstream Period
From the late nineties, club culture and hip-hop in Estonia became part of the global commercial leisure industry. Subcultural trend, in the broadest sense, has become commercialised, at the same time it has become an umbrella term for several different styles, including new underground sub-scenes that emerge in the context of the same subculture. According to the logic of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), a style that has become known through commercial media loses its value, and the 'new vanguard' starts to create new styles and distance itself from the commercialised style. In this period, the meaning of 'mainstream' is switched from outside to inside borders of subcultural trends. The core group of early adopters (contemporary subcultural elite) and the new underground start to distance themselves from the commercialised element of subcultural trends, which is believed to have lost its authenticity.

> Märt (18, 2008):
> "What you hear on the radio is relatively commercial. I don't like it, perhaps women like it more, or those who don't know what the real thing is. Like that concert by 50 Cent (well-known US hip-hop artist) which was, I wouldn't have gone there if you'd paid me, that's not the real thing."

Subcultural identity in the mainstream period is often defined in relation to 'trend followers'[7] who are associated with the popularised element of the style. They are often perceived as following the most easily graspable style elements and attitudes of subculture from the mainstream media without any criticism or true sense of authenticity. It is common that trend followers become the 'others' who are often blamed for the negative image of a subcultural trend in society at large.

Within the framework of this period, the structure inside subcultural trends has changed, as their position in society. It is no longer possible to distinguish 'underground' subcultural trends from 'mainstream' subcultural trends. Both sides are present in the framework of the same subcultural style. The subcultural identity of devotees is distinguished from that of mainstream trend followers, believed to be more interested in external style only without any real sense of authenticity, or commercial artists who prostitute themselves for money.

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[7] The orginal word used in interviews was "wannabe", which has a strongly negative connotation. Trend follower is a more neutral term and does not necessarily exclude devoted followers. However, in this subchapter we refer to mainstream trend followers with the same connotation as "wannabes".

The WEB 2 Period

The WEB 2 period marks the beginning of the considerable impact of technological possibilities. Any alternative work or production is available and can be introduced and exchanged through social networks. New music and styles spread rapidly among interested people regardless of their location. In the local context, social networks on the internet enable newcomers (party promoters and DJs) to attract audiences and organise events more easily.

Easy access to new music, social relations within the underground scene in other countries, and, to some extent, opportunities for travel have altered the difference between the metropolis and the periphery. Even though the undergound scene in itself is still different in Tallinn (periphery) and London (metropolis), it does not determine the taste and choices of the participants.

> Kevin (26, 2010):
> "A friend told me about dubstep at a rap party, it started to appear in the UK. I started to listen to it, and when there were the first parties in London (2006), we went there."

It is possible to participate actively in a global underground scene before the new style has been established in Estonia. People who cannot afford to travel participate in it through networking and music exchange over the internet.

Styles and scenes are fluid, mixed and constantly changing. Social networks on the internet allow new promoters or DJs to become known quickly and briefly. It is becoming common for many people to be involved in DJing and promotion for a while, only to be rapidly replaced by newcomers.

> Kevin (26, 2010):
> "Everybody wants to have parties! It's so popular to be a promoter. To bring an artist from abroad, that's cool! Some kind of new doers, 'one-night stars', as everybody calls them. They do it a couple of times, a couple of months and then they disappear."

From this period, the borders between subcultural trends have lost importance again. Subcultural identity is certainly not bound to a certain style; this is in part a return to a similar situation at the beginning of the nineties – subcultural identity in many cases being based on proximity again. On the other hand, it is definitely not the case now that information and cultural productions (music) are not available or that people 'have to handle the lack of choice' (Kjeldgaard 2003). As so many styles are available and new ones are emerging, 'cool' is constantly being redefined, and the preferred identification is one which embraces those people who are able to keep up with it. Most important is proximity with people who are considered sufficiently hip, at the same time sufficiently cosmopolitan and authentic, experienced in 'style surfing' (Polhemus 1997) and sharing 'good taste.'

CONCLUSIONS

When we look at the diffusion of subcultural trends in Estonia, it is clear that the basis for identification and the dynamics of subcultural groups change at different stages. The development of subcultural trends in Estonia, as it has been analysed in this article, can also be interpreted as a short history of subculture moving from stronger cultural boundaries to fluid networks. Initially, subcultural trends were followed by a small group of devotees who share rather homogeneous norms; later, trends spread, and people and norms become heterogeneous.

In the beginning there is more group-centeredness, and starting from the second stage identifications according to style, which makes some classical subcultural theories from Birmingham usable in explaining the phenomenon. However, in contrast to the working class youth investigated in UK as the basis for subcultural theories, early adopters of new trends in Estonia are mostly elitist and avant-garde, and to analyse their activities as a reaction to social circumstances would be too one-sided. Although suitable elements of global trends were used by the Estonian youth in order to oppose some aspects of society and differentiate themselves from the Soviet culture, from the outset the rebellion was a relatively insignificant part of the youth cultural practices.

As exemplified in this article, music and style became relevant for a short period in the mid-nineties. Since subcultural style has become mainstream, specific music and style are once again starting to lose their central status in the building of cultural identity. While underground and mainstream are prevalent within the same style, identification is focused on a particular social network and the qualities which are believed to characterise its people – keeping up with a constantly redefined cool. Estonia's position as a periphery has also started to change – new emerging styles are promoted using new media channels in networks which exceed the Estonian audience, participants become, at least on some level, part of global culture. Just as being defined as 'global underground' in times of subcultural industry (Roberts 2005) is a powerful tool in putting oneself in the big picture, subcultural identification might also be a tool for competing in the (sub)cultural field.

Regarding structural restriction in cultural consumption, social background did not play a great role, at least in material terms, in the first half of nineties – most of society was equally poor. Adoption of new subcultural trends started as a DIY practice in Estonia – everything had to be created by the early adopters. Today Estonia is characterised by considerable income discrepancies between different sectors of the population, but we do not believe that it is of crucial importance in (sub)cultural consumption and production. If we take into consideration the impact of new social media, cultural consumption has become less influenced by material resources as cultural products and even means for production, such as music-making, are freely available on internet sites[8]. Fluidity of networks and participation in different youth cultural practices have also been shaped by social network sites which favour multiple and temporal belonging. Today it is difficult to see clear boundaries between subcultural trends; cultural identities are constantly re-defined according to the changing crowd and one's position in the underground scene.

It is our contention that youth cultural trends and identities have rather different meanings depending on different period of time and background and have their own particularities in a small peripheral country with the Soviet past like Estonia.

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[8] Estonia is a widely computerised country with easy access to internet for everybody regardless the economic situation (Special Eurobarometer 362. E-Communications Household Survey 2011).

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