

RESPONSIBILITY OF BEING A “HIPSTER” IN A WARTIME IN UKRAINE

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Summary

The focus is on the fashion practices of Ukrainian youth, so called ‘hipsters’, during the war. In the essay we move beyond understanding hipsters as a meaningless youth subculture of cultural appropriation and recombination. Instead, we consider hipsters as a force of resistance in cultural and war front lines. Ukrainian events proved that hipsters are not only about sophisticated consumer choices and humane ecological changes. A new public aesthetic for Kharkiv is considered on the example of the Nikolsky shopping center, which was built taking into account the new demands and tastes of hipsters. Despite its recent history, Nikolsky suffered from the bombings, but managed to reopen its doors and became one of the symbols of Kharkov's resilience and rebelliousness. The hipster rebellion is considered as the creation of a new liberation aesthetic and ethic in Ukrainian society. The key features of fashion behavior in the context of deglobalization processes are outlined, and vectors for future research are proposed. The work was done with support of the Solidarity Fellowship, sponsored by the Institute for Human Sciences (Vienna).

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1. Introduction

Since Russian forces invaded Ukrainian cities and destroyed ‘normal’ everyday life, including trade infrastructure, our society has become the heir to the counter-cultural movements of the late 1960s, which vigorously challenge the status quo. Each subsequent decade of the post-war era saw this shattering of social standards, riots and struggles that revolutionized all aspects of music, art, government and civil society. But after punk was plasticized and hip-hop lost its impetus for social change, all the previously dominant currents of "counter-culture" merged together (Mark Carrigan). Now the mutation and transatlantic mixing of styles, tastes and behavior has come to the Ukrainian context to define the generally vague idea of a hipster. The term implies insincerity or unoriginality, even "the end of Western civilization"¹, but it is used to refer to some very hot and sincere practices: cycling, food, activism (Matt Lodder). The term "hipsters" refers to a subculture and economic class with particular consumer preferences.

¹ Douglas Haddow believes that the counterculture has mutated into a self-absorbing vacuum.

2. A hipster at war

These materials are the result of thinking about two questions about the nature of modern subcultures: How are hipsters, for example, able to exist during war, how do they manage to maintain the cohesion of a group that is constantly undergoing internal changes? And why do "skinny jeans" – a new kind of hipster subculture – reflect major sociocultural changes? The pursuit of these grandiose questions is undoubtedly very ambitious. Although this study will not give direct and comprehensive answers, we offer some generalizations about hipsters and sociocultural shifts in general.

From the point of view of the first question, I believe that shared aesthetic standards are promoted in social networks, blogs and sites, which allows to achieve a high degree of stylization, to offer a hybrid aesthetic that quickly responds to the threat of proliferation and mass consumption. Many of the fashionable innovations actualized today among Ukrainian hipsters represent modern appropriations into national, in the political sense, or traditional, in the folklore sense, cultural forms based on objects and symbols, respectively, of statehood and national clothing.

Examples include yellow and blue ribbons, embroidery elements – a common hipster fashion accessory in addition to acting as a visual guide to the transformation of the sign from a symbol of solidarity with the Ukrainian Military Forces (ZSU) into a very popular everyday trend.

Bricolage, the artificial use of objects from various sources in one's clothing, provides hipsters with a means to express dissent in the growing landscape of mass consumer goods. Hipster style develops for the sake of provocation. They must become hyper-consumers to remain socially distinct. The events of the Russian aggression turned the Ukrainian national symbol into a marker that signaled the difference from the lifestyle of the majority. Hipsters as a transatlantic phenomenon show extreme apoliticality, but the Ukrainian context demonstrated the unexpected politicization of broad swaths of young people who, before the winter events in Kyiv, Kharkiv and other cities of Ukraine, had no acute social involvement.

3. Deglobalization

What explains the Ukrainian hipster aesthetic aside from its obvious deviation from typical or normal clothing? I believe that the romance of the Maidan revolution of Dignity in 2014 year, which extends far beyond appearance: what a person eats, where and with whom he spends his free time, and what music he listens to – all variables involved in the construction of taste.

The motivation in the consumption structure of this subgroup after Maidan is the "choice of civilization." This choice today implies a rejection of the idealism of the past or any established norm of the globalized world, and an orientation towards a regional center. Ukrainian people with a high taste in hipster culture are more likely to bring ideas or styles from different eras, American pop-culture and a national idea, as inspiration for their lifestyle at a wartime. We can consider the adequacy of this picture in terms of Gabriel Tarde's concept of "imitation." According to the classics, all innovations and discoveries consist of imitations. We agree with this statement and believes that all imitations are the source of inventions. Innovation is the result of the same semantic mechanism as imitation.

In our deglobalized world (*Alicia Herrero, 2021*), where the same menu of goods and services (Starbucks, McDonalds, H&M) becomes a marker of belonging to a certain regional political center, consumption itself has become a political act. When consuming, a person always declares something, at least to a minimal extent. It is through acts of consumption, or anti-consumption, that we understand our identities and qualify those around us. Consumption provides a fast-acting means of self-expression, individual uniqueness, or reference to belonging to another group (nation, or even civilization) in a particular cultural context.

4. Shopping center as a hipster heritage

Trading center 'Nikolsky' is the youngest shopping complex in Kharkiv. Opened a year ago in the very center of the city, it immediately won the love of Kharkiv residents. By the standards of the old center, 1 year is an insignificant age, but its damage during the bombing of Kharkov, the partial collapse of the dome, were perceived by the townspeople as a big loss, comparable to the destruction of the 'Zaliznychnik', architectural monument of the constructivism, in August 2022. It is difficult to imagine a city without 'Nikolsky' and other shopping centers. Should we consider the opening of H&M and Esprit in the summer of 2021 as an important historical event in the life of Kharkiv? Should we remember this victory of the consumer society in Kharkiv? The war and the reactions of the most educated part of society, as well as the newcomers, showed that, yes.

Shopping malls are often referred to as temples of consumption. As befits a temple, they generate a sense of certainty, safety and security. That is why they may seem too controlled. While sociologists, urbanists, and social geographers have often spoken out against shopping centers over the past thirty years, surprisingly, for most Lithuanians, they are – or once were – the main public places of the city. Their criticism can often be interpreted as dissatisfaction with the quality of the public sphere produced here. Non-conflict, depoliticized, toothless space of unity in consumer ecstasy. More broadly, the skepticism towards shopping centers is generated by the fact that they clearly regulate the navigation between the norm and deviation. The shopping center as an institution resists any manifestation of deviation, therefore it can seem overly brilliant, joyful and oppressively authoritarian. Criticism of malls requires less happiness and consensus, and more controversy and controversy, especially when they mimic the city's main scenes—streets, markets, and other traditional public spaces.

In "America" Andy Warhol wrote "If you think about it, supermarkets are a bit like museums". Loved by hipsters 'Nikolsky' has changed the very concept of the place of trade, turning it into a bulk networked quasi-world where you can spend your whole life. 'Nikolsky' can be considered a successful attempt at the city level to create a public space that would serve as a communicative platform for a wide range of citizens, allowing them to receive an intense and diverse experience. The concentrated trade and leisure offer and the horizontal nature of relations turned out to be very attractive to the Ukrainian hipster, who is accustomed to hierarchy even in a grocery store. It is also important that, unlike other cultural institutions, shopping centers have developed clear principles of operation that can be easily calculated. In accordance with the logic of the development of public life, there is a growing demand among hipsters for a different quality of public spaces, which primarily implies convenience for observation and self-presentation, meetings and acquaintance with cultural diversity. In this context, it becomes obvious how hipster tastes influence not only retail development, but also the development of the entire city. What is he willing to do in order not to die? Obviously, follow the hipsters.

Artistic institutions, which have a lot of experience in producing what cultural sociologist Pascal Gielain calls depth, can be useful here. The “common” theorist and co-inventor of the concept of “comonism” does not idealize the function of institutions, but argues confidently that the old institutions at least upheld a hierarchy of values that enabled them to evaluate creativity in a way that was different from the system of measuring investment and productivity. Depth gives rise to borderline cases, ambivalences, anomalies that can be included in the structure of the shopping center by triggering the creative process. In order not to grow old, but, on the contrary, to rise and create something, the oldest shopping centers in Vilnius need faith and intuition in the logic of culture, not the market. Thus, in a hipster perspective, we see the potential of the Nikolsky shopping center as a cultural heritage site.

5. Future searching

The hipster aesthetic is difficult to describe as a style given the diffuse nature of cultural practices, but further research may reduce this confusion. First, I would try to explore the differences between hipster and non-hipster consumption in the Ukrainian social media. Second, the motivation of ordinary consumers, that is, people who simply buy hipster goods (mostly online) and look like a hipster to join the army forces or volunteer movement. As said Mark Carrigan, the nature of consumption among hipsters is marked by a greater interest in artisanal, local products, which is the object of interest in the case of Ukrainian hipsters too. But there is another demand: all brands must work with charitable foundations that help the army or displaced people. There are specific online resources (Instagram, Facebook, Telegram) that act as hubs through which hipsters broadcast taste and present images of charity activity. Which of them collect the most "likes" and reposts? How exactly do they use them: "volunteer looking", "ruin selfies", etc. Hipsters are harbingers of great changes in our understanding of the patriotism. By selecting aesthetically worthy forms in indie culture, the popular culture of previous eras, and the Ukrainian army victories, these consumers use their cultural capital creatively, which distinguishes them from stereotypical notions of hipsters as pointless consumers (*Zeynep, A. & Thompson, C. J., 2011*). All bearded and tattooed men at the front or fashionably dressed volunteers prove otherwise.

Do hipsters work in creative industries, artists, writers, or bloggers in those foreign cities where they were evacuated at the beginning of the war? Or are they just ‘ZARA refugees’ and buy MacDonald's hamburgers²? Interview data can reveal important differences between different professional, ethnic, social groups. Is their fashion largely related to ethnic traditions (embroidered shirt)? Do hipsters want to stand out among European hipsters, Russians in Europe, friends from Belarus? How?

In addition to these steps, future studies will try to trace changes in the meaning of hipster war objects (Bayraktar drones³, uniform, special equipment, etc.); what feelings, affects and emotions stimulate demand and taste in this space. By considering contemporary polarization of the world, we can describe the trends of change. Do tastes differ depending on location in deglobalized world: Warsaw or Moscow, colony or metropolis.

² McDonald's Ukrainian restaurants are closed.

³ The Ukrainian news anchor calls the new extortion drones "cool", because they are beautiful, will bring Ukraine more enemy deaths and money for the economy.

6. Conclusions

Ukrainian fight for the Independence changed the meaning of well-known signs or events. Wartime consumption is a form of power in the information society. So we need to move beyond understanding hipsters as a meaningless youth subculture of cultural appropriation and recombination. Instead, we should consider hipsters as a force of resistance in cultural and war front lines. Ukrainian events proved that hipsters are not only about sophisticated consumer choices and humane ecological changes. Their rebellion is manifested not only in appearance, but also in a new liberation aesthetic/ethic. Hipsters are a new political entity that does not aspire to power, it does not have representatives, it does not even have specific political demands, except for the responsibility to be more humane, more original, more polite, that's all.

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