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Exploring subcultural models of a discursive youth net-radio hierarchy

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Based on an empirical case study of transnational (United States and Australia) youth net-radio users, this article evaluates theoretical debates between the classic and contemporary post-subcultural theories. This article seeks to bridge the two theoretical strands and re-evaluates the role of style, resistance, and social class in subcultural theory by relating them to the dynamics of a transnational youth net-radio hierarchy. This net-radio hierarchy is defined by youths' musical tastes; how much power 16 users have over their net-radio consumption and production practices, and their resistance to traditional radio.

Mediated youth net-radio subcultures

Net-radio as alternative-radical (subcultural) media

Developed in 1993 in the United States, net-radio is defined as an audio technology that streams over the internet (Malamud 1997). Users of this technology belong to a multimedia (text, audio, and visual), local/global 'mediated culture' and spend time engaged in 'being many audiences' across a wide range of media-related activities, inside and outside the internet domain (Nightingale 1994, 40–1). Unlike the regular, active internet user, net-radio users are not only active users, but also activist producers and managers of multimedia content. Net-radio's characteristics mean that its 'user-defined personal involvement' and interaction defines its consumption practices and audience profile (Freire 2007, 97). In contrast to the 'traditional discourse of radioness', this is where the real revolution of net-radio lies – in its radical mode of personal audience address (Freire 2007, 97).

Net-radio can be seen as a form of alternative-radical media that encourages subcultural activity because it offers 'alternative sites of distribution' which challenge traditional radio (Atton 2002, 27). Net-radio users can be described as a subculture because they have the ability to exhibit 'values, behaviours and physical artifacts' that 'distinguishes [themselves] from the larger [mainstream radio] culture' (Newman 2004, 100). This net-radio subculture is based on a discursive hierarchy that is internally organized by taste (music) distinctions, power over production practices, and the degree of resistance to traditional radio formats.

Radio online or net-only radio

To describe this cultural hierarchy, this article distinguishes between the two types of net-radio: radio online and net-only radio. Although both types of net-radio share the advantages of the internet and digitalization, and the principles of technological

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convergence, their differentiation is largely based on regulatory practices, content and audience formations (Priestman 2002). Radio online can be defined as regulated (or licensed) traditional radio broadcasters with existing audiences who have incorporated the internet as an adjunct. Superimposed on radio online are the institutional regulations and assumptions about audiences that are often associated with traditional radio.

Traditional radio usually operates in analogue mode, and is disseminated via a centralized broadcast model. This creates relatively fixed patterns of audience reception, where programs are broadcast and listened to according to regular and relatively unchangeable relations of time and space. This highly structured pattern of dissemination, under which traditional radio operates, allows for fairly stable audience formations; users listen and engage through stable spatial-temporal domains. The scope for audience feedback and interactivity is constrained by the limited options available though this standard broadcast model.

Radio online involves established, regulated (licensed), traditional radio broadcasters with existing audiences and formatted content who have incorporated the internet as an adjunct. Content on traditional radio is generally associated with classic broadcast formats such as news, current affairs, interviews, and mostly mainstream music. Being regulated (or licensed) by government authorities means that radio online is controlled, in part, by the State. Given these factors, this article contends that radio online could be considered the more conservative type of net-radio because it is 'tied to the conventions of doing media' because its users are subjected to mainstream, formatted, traditional radio programming, dictated and controlled by station managers and regulated by government authorities (Atton 2004, xi).

In contrast, net-only radio webcasts exclusively over the internet and (generally) unregulated (unlicensed) by government authorities and lacks State control, except for music copyright laws. Unlike radio online, net-only radio has to build audiences from scratch and can behave in two ways: It can either apply the traditional methods and techniques associated with classic radio content (news, current affairs, interviews, music) or take advantage of its unlicensed nature which allows for innovation and freedom to narrowcast to niche audiences such as alternative music lovers, who were previously poorly served by the majority of traditional radio stations (Priestman 2002; Tacchi 2000). This article contends that net-only radio is the more radical type of net-radio because it can offer 'a range of media products (for example, non-formatted, alternative music) ... that work against or seek to develop different forms of the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of doing media' (Atton 2004, xi).

Net-only radio may also be considered more radical because it shifts away from the standard broadcast models to multichannel, niche audience models of narrowcast programming, which mainstream broadcasters often fail to provide (Priestman 2002). Versions of this second type of net-only radio are examples of what Downing et al. (2001) calls radical media because some net-only radio stations have a political agenda to overthrow the mainstream hegemonic power structures associated with traditional radio, although they may vary in the depth of radicalism.

It is not the opinion of this author that more traditional forms of radio (or even newer forms such as radio online) are always inherently conservative. Some programmings on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) Radio National (RN) or progressive community radio stations such as 3CR in Australia or Pacifica in the United States are radio online stations which demonstrate that radical content is possible within traditional radio formats. However, the flexible, relatively unregulated, and open forms of net-only radio gives rise to the possibility of more radical forms of content and more autonomous

forms of production and reception being created. This process does not always automatically lead to radical content, and the larger question of whether autonomous cultural production and reception of net-only radio is radical or simply a form of niche consumption remains. That said, this article makes a case for a connection between various modes of net-radio consumption, radical/alternative/mainstream forms and content, and hence a discursive cultural hierarchy.

Youths, the internet, and music tastes

The limited available research from the industry and the academy suggests a synergy between youths, internet consumption, and the desire for alternative music. Most of the current net-radio audience research comes from the industry in the United States. For example, the marketing company Arbitron/Edison in New York City (US) has reported that college students¹ aged between 18 and 24 years access net-radio in search of music rarely found on traditional radio (Bouvard and Rosin 1998; Webster 2009). However, industry researchers, such as Arbitron/Edison, only provide a one-dimensional view; 'well-circumscribed discursive figures' which allow media managers to only partially know net-radio users (Hartley 1987, 127, cited in Ang 1991, 3).

Academics have studied the relationship between youth subcultures, music, and internet consumption (in general) – for example, the Goths of the 1980s (Hodkinson 2002, 2004) and the straightedgers of the 1990s (Wilson and Atkinson 2005; Williams and Copes 2005; Williams 2006) – and refer to two kinds of youth subcultures emerging on the internet forum: those who use the internet as a 'supplement' to participation in a face-to-face music scene and those who use the internet as a 'primary' or 'sole' source of subcultural participation. While these studies (industry and the academy) offer a current-day trajectory of synergies between youth subcultures, musical tastes, and the internet, they fail to include the voices of net-radio users.

Although a growing body of scholarly work is exploring the net-radio phenomenon,² none of these studies refer specifically to youths or their subcultural practices. Tacchi, Hartley, and Lewis (2004) found that the internet encourages youths to produce creative content that subverts and challenges mainstream media, and Albarran et al. (2007) reported that 58% of college students from the University of Texas in the United States listen to net-radio rather than traditional radio for alternative music. Unlike this article, these studies do not differentiate between either type of net-radio consumption (radio online and net-only radio) nor allude to the formation of a net-radio subculture.

Applying subcultural research to a youth net-radio hierarchy

Consumption of net-radio (radio online and net-only radio) as an empirical test case helps to evaluate the usefulness of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (CCCS) traditional concepts such as 'resistant subcultures' (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Fox 1987); in comparison with the critiques of resistance by post-subculturalists (such as Thornton 1996; Bennett 1999; Blackman 2005; Huq 2006; Gelder 2007; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Nayak 2006; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006) and the emphasis on 'taste cultures' in post modern times. A subcultural analysis of 'a mediated net-radio subculture' is helpful in describing its hierarchy, which is determined by power, consumption, production, political ideology, resistance, tastes and/or shared interests.

Analysing the consumption activities of net-radio users is also similar to the hierarchies of cultural distinctions in Fox's (1987) study of US punks during the 1980s, a study which

builds on the work from the traditional subculturalists of the CCCS. Fox found that punks' participation in the counterculture scene varied according to different degrees of investment into the alternative norms and values. Out of this uncertainty in Fox's (1987, 350–1) study surfaced a stratification of the US punk scene which uncovered four typologies: 'hardcore', 'soft-core', 'preppie', and 'spectators' which are hierarchically arranged by a commitment to an anti-establishment lifestyle and the punk counterculture. Unlike members of the CCCS, Fox (1987, 350) argues that a punk scene is not necessarily a coherent group but constitutes a 'near group' where 'membership was impermanent and shifting' and 'not always clearly defined'. Similar in this article, this discursive, three tier, net-radio hierarchy described by conceptual categories such as 'the opposite end's; *The Radicals* ('hardcore punks'), versus *The Conservatives* ('preppie' or 'spectators'); and 'the in-betweeners', *The Swingers* ('soft-core punks') (Fox 1987, 350–1) reflects that net-radio consumption is not always clearly defined.

Resistance cultures (The Radicals): Highest tier in this net-radio hierarchy

The highest tier in the net-radio hierarchy consists of users who are disenfranchised by traditional radio and who access alternative, web-based music exclusively via net-only radio as a political act. This tier has a lot of power over their consumption patterns and emerges as the users, producers, and managers of content (mainly music) not found on traditional radio. This conceptual category in this net-radio hierarchy I call *The Radicals* because members adopt a subcultural model of resistance outlined by Hall and Jefferson (1976), and Hebdige (1979). These members of the CCCS applied Marxist theories of class conflict and political rebellion against dominant hegemonic societal norms to study the emergence of working-class (mostly male) youth subcultures from the 1950s to the 1970s (e.g., Teddy Boys, Mods, Rastafarians, punks, and skinheads). Using a process of semiotics, Hall and Jefferson, and Hebdige argued that these youth subcultures were resistant subcultures who used various forms (musical tastes, style, and political ideology) to rebel against the existing hegemony (or status quo). For example, Hebdige (1979, 17) argued that the punk movement's challenge to hegemony (its counterculture) came in two coherent forms: (a) 'the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc) into mass-produced objects (the commodity form)', and (b) the 'labelling' and redefinition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups – the police, the media, and the judiciary (the ideological form) (Hebdige 1979, 94–9). He argued that punk's embodiment of the 'commodity' and 'ideological' form was reflected in their 'revolt into style' (or bricolage), in which a collection of diverse elements and objects are brought together from a variety of sources (e.g., swastikas on jackets or jeans, garbage bags as shirts or dresses, safety pins through their cheeks, razor blades as earrings, and the union jack as scarves) to communicate counterculture meanings (Hebdige 1979, 94–9, 106). While net-only radio can be seen as a site of resistant (ideological) practice – an outlet for youth's creative expression and social struggle fuelled by an opposition to traditional radio formats, its notion of 'style' differs from CCCS's notion as 'style' because it's more covert, and less visually focused, and can take on different meanings and significance within a net-radio community.

Similar to Fox's (1987, 350) 'hardcore punks', *the radicals* in this net-radio hierarchy derive the greatest prestige accolades for their counterculture views and set the trends and defined the norms and values for the net-radio scene. As Fox (1987, 350) noted in her study, the most committed and most involved members of the US punk scene were the 'hardcore punks', which were smallest in number but derived the greatest prestige from

being involved in an anti-establishment lifestyle. Fox found that ‘hardcore punks’ set the trends and defined the norms and values for the US punk scene.

Taste cultures (The Conservatives): Lowest tier in the net-radio hierarchy

The lowest tier consists of users who emerge (exclusively) as radio online users who access cultural music, news, and language from their homelands or parents’ homelands. This tier is called *The Conservatives* because they are still tied to traditional radio formats and formed out of what Thornton (1996, 8) refers to as ‘taste cultures’ – cultures defined in terms of taste distinctions, social structure, beliefs, hierarchies, divisions of social power and generally devoid of resistant activities. As Thornton (1996, 8,11) argues, a traditional subcultural theory focusing on gender specific (male), Marxist-class hierarchies, united under a subversive style and ‘proto political acts’, (as proposed by Hall/Jefferson and Hebdige), is not always necessarily always applicable to contemporary youth subcultures.

The Conservatives (radio online users) in this net-radio hierarchy are similar to Fox’s (1987, 350) ‘preppie punks’, who constituted a large portion of the net-radio membership, but are only minimally committed to an anti-establishment lifestyle and counterculture. *The Conservatives* are also similar (in some ways) to Fox’s (1987, 350) ‘spectators’ who don’t follow the standards and expectations of the core punk members and who are ‘outsiders with an interest in the punk scene’ (Fox 1987, p. 351). Like Fox’s ‘preppie punks’ and ‘spectators’, *The Conservatives* (radio online users) are held in low esteem by the two core groups *The Radicals*, (i.e. net-only radio users) (core punks) and *The Swingers*, (i.e. net-only radio and radio online users) (soft-core punks) for their lack of inner conviction and degree of participation in the net-radio counterculture.

Resistant cultures versus taste cultures (The Swingers): Middle tier in the net-radio hierarchy

The middle tier in this hierarchy consists of users who access both types of net-radio (radio online and net-only radio). This tier have the most options in relation to consumption practices in this hierarchy, but exercises less power over production than the highest tier because they do not own or run net-only radio stations. I call this middle tier *The Swingers* because they float between being members of a ‘resistant culture’ (net-only radio) and ‘taste culture’ (radio online). These *Swingers* are similar to Fox’s (1987, 350) ‘softcore punks’ who were moderately dedicated to an anti-establishment lifestyle and punk counterculture (Fox 1987, 350). Like the ‘soft-core punks’, *The Swingers* do not hold the same social status and are dictated to by *The Radicals* (hardcore punks) whom they generally admired; and derive some prestige from being minimally involved in a rebellion against the status quo.

This middle tier may also be described as *neo-tribes* (Bennett 1999, 614), *post-subculture* (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003), or *beyond subculture* (Huq 2006) tapping into fluid, individualist, autonomous, free-floating (net-radio) cultural net-radio ‘scenes’. Similar to Fox’s (1987) study and Thornton’s (1996) work, this middle tier reflects the complex taste stratifications and social mobility of contemporary youth subcultures. Users float between being a net-only radio, ‘resistant culture’ and a radio online, ‘taste culture.’ This tier also supports the notion that youths’ cultural identities are tied to social class; that is, their identity is ‘closely intertwined with family histories, gender, place, class, region and locality’ (Nayak 2006, 320). It also supports the claim by other subculturalists (Hesmondhalgh 2005; Blackman 2005; Gelder 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006;

Nayak 2006) for the continuing relevance of social class as an analytical category in subcultural research.

Methodology

This article draws on a *mixed methods research* design (a preliminary survey, interviews, and participant observation) to describe the in-depth socio-cultural experience of a typical youth net-radio user (Creswell 2009). College students' consumption of net-radio became the research focus because of the intensive use of the medium by this demographic. A comparative analysis was conducted between the United States, where net-radio is thriving, and Australia, where it is emerging. This comparison included the net-radio consumption of undergraduate college students aged 18–24 years who were enrolled in journalism, media, and communications programs at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia and City University of New York's (CUNY) Brooklyn College in New York City, US.

From a preliminary survey, 16 youth net-radio users (8 from Monash and 8 from CUNY's Brooklyn College) volunteered their time to be interviewed and observed. For confidentiality reasons, participants were given pseudonyms. Students were observed on an ad hoc basis at their college net-only radio stations – Radio Monash or Brooklyn College Radio – and in their social settings. Participant observation ranged from outside viewing – hanging around the alternative music scene in Melbourne and New York City (Brooklyn, West and East Village) and recording observations – to inclusion, such as attendance at a musical gig upon invitation from a participant. At various stages the author also taught the theory and practice of net-radio to these participants from Monash University and CUNY Brooklyn College's Department of Radio and Television.

Three-tiered net-radio (discursive) subculture

In this study there were seven males and nine females participants identified in this subculture, the majority of who were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The gender breakdown challenges traditionalists from the CCCS argument that males are the dominant gender in relation to authenticity/hierarchy/subcultures. Its ethnicity richness implies that youths' subcultural styles and identities are closely bound with social class, ('place . . . region and locality', Nayak 2006, 320) – a point which some researchers (Nayak 2006; Huq 2006; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006) argue, is often overlooked by traditionalists at the CCCS and almost discarded by some post-subculturalists.

Although there was no systematic assumption of musical hierarchies, there was empirical evidence among the 16 youths who were surveyed, interviewed, and observed in this study that mainstream (pop) music is 'too orthodox', 'too lowbrow', and follows the traditional status quo far too much. In comparison, alternative music was considered 'highbrow', 'innovative', and 'bucked the system' of traditional radio. The dichotomy is similar to Barnard's (2000) definition of *mainstream* as traditional, conservative, and reactionary, whereas *alternative* is modern, progressive, and revolutionary. This dichotomy helps to explain a discursive youth net-radio hierarchy based on musical tastes, power bases, and resistant practices and provides an understanding of this somewhat fragmented subculture.

Lowest tier (*The Conservatives*)

As Table 7.1 reflects, seven participants (5 females and 2 males), mostly Australians, belong to this lowest tier. Participants listen to radio online exclusively to hear cultural

Table 7.1. Lowest-tiered youth net-radio subculture: Seven youths who only access radio online.

Name	Country of residence	Homeland or parents' homeland
Tanya	Australia	Sri Lanka (parents' homeland)
Sandra	Australia	Philippines (parents' homeland)
Hanna	Australia	Mauritius (homeland)
Anna	Australia	USA (homeland)
Adini	Australia	India (homeland)
Koki	USA	Korea (homeland)
Sanyie	USA	Bangladesh (homeland)

music, news, and language from their cultural homelands – content that is rarely heard on traditional radio in the country where they are currently living. This tier (*The Conservatives*) is tied to ‘the conventions of doing media’ and exists comfortably alongside (and works with) traditional radio (Atton 2002, 27). Its female dominance supports CCCS argument that women are less likely to participate in resistance/reproduction practices.

In net-radio’s ‘hierarchy of authority’, this lowest tier have limited power over their consumption patterns and access radio online as a ‘supplement’ to face-to-face participation in their cultural homelands. For example, Adini listens to radio online stations to hear news and music from his homeland in South India. Adini came to Melbourne to study in 2004. Since then he has been an avid listener of India’s state radio online station, All India Radio (<http://www.allindiaradio.org>). He said Australian newspaper websites such as *The Age*, *The Australian*, and the *Herald Sun* ‘fail to report on international news’. He says, ‘Forty-three percent of Australians are from a multicultural background and want to stay in touch with their country; therefore they turn to online media from their homeland’. Adini says that, unlike local stations in Australia, All India Radio plays a variety of Indian music like *bhangra*, a genre that Huq (2006) notes has grown in popularity among Asian Diaspora communities.

Like Adini, most members of this tier are youth diaspora from ethnic backgrounds who congregate together based on ‘shared tastes and interests’ (Thornton 1996, 8). In this lowest tier 3 synergies among ethnicity, geography, and radio online consumption patterns emerge: (a) radio online provides listeners with a connection to one’s own culture or a window to other cultures, (b) radio online enables time-space convergence, and (c) radio online positions listeners as transnational citizens.

This lowest tier are not necessarily the subcultural model of resistance outlined by Hall and Jefferson (1976) and Hebdige (1979), and are generally not committed to an overt or visually distinctive subversive style. Many do not dress in a spectacular way. As Hanna and Tanya say, their style is ‘ordinary’ or ‘conventional’. That said, this tier is resisting in a small way the traditional radio that dominates in the locality where they are currently residing. The issue these youths have is the inability or need to access their own culture because they are living abroad; they are marginalized by the dominant culture and hence, they tap into radio online. Sanyie, Koki, Sandra, Adini, and Anna are similar to what Fox (1987, 350) calls ‘preppie punks’; members of this tier constitute a large portion (40%) of this net-radio membership but are only minimally committed to an anti-establishment lifestyle and radio counterculture.

As for Tanya and Hanna, they do not necessarily see themselves as members of a subculture. ‘I listen to radio online to hear news and music from Sri Lanka radio . . . but do not see myself as being part of this huge subculture’, Tanya says. Hanna adds, ‘It’s not really a subcultural thing to me; it’s all about accessing French radio stations that also

stream online'. Applying Fox's (1987, 351) typology, Tanya and Hanna are the 'spectators' who are merely 'outsiders' with an interest in radio online. However in Thornton's (1996, 8) terms, Tanya and Hanna are nonetheless members of a 'taste culture' because they have 'something in common with each other'; that is, tastes and interest in other cultures that 'distinguishes them in a significant way from other social groups'. This lowest tier is considered the 'straight' members of the net-radio subculture (Thornton 1996, 3–4, 92).

Middle tier (The Swingers)

As Table 7.2 reflects, seven participants (4 females and 3 males), mostly from the United States, are members of the middle tier and reflects that 'gender' is not necessarily a defining factor in relation to authenticity/hierarchy/subcultures. This tier is called *The Swingers* because they fluctuate in their subcultural practices on four levels. First, members swing between: (a) being (*Conservative*) radio online users; and (b) being (*Radical*) net-only radio users, managers, and producers. Second, similar to some virtual Goth and straightedge subcultures (Hodkinson 2002, 2004; Haenfler 2004; Wilson and Atkinson 2005; Williams 2006, 2007; Williams and Copes 2005, 2007), members swing between: (a) accessing radio online as a 'supplement' to face-to-face experience in their distant homelands or parents' homelands; and (b) using net-only radio as a 'primary' or 'sole' source of subcultural participation and cultural production of alternative music. Participants in this tier has more options in relation to consumption practices but exercise less power over cultural production than the highest tier because they do not own and manage net-only radio stations.

Third, members swing between: (a) adopting a covert and normal dress sense; and (b) adopting an overt or visually spectacular and distinctive subversive bricolage. Finally, in their desire to hear both mainstream music on radio online and alternative music on net-only radio, this tier's members swing between: (a) participating in postmodern, subculturalist activity based on fluid and individualized 'shared tastes and interests' (Thornton 1996, 8); and (b) participating in a subculture based on the traditional models of resistance put forward by Hall and Jefferson (1976) and Hebdige (1979). This middle tier adopt a more fragmented, heterogeneous, and individualistic approach to cultural style and identification.

Diana emulates Thornton's (1996, 8) 'taste cultures'. Of Caucasian descent but born in Mexico City, Diana listens to two radio online stations from Mexico: a commercial station called Radio Global (<http://www.radiogloba.org>) based in Tijuana and a college student station, Ibero 90.9.FM (<http://www.iber0909.fm>), at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. Both stations play Mexican folk with electronica music, which keeps Diana

Table 7.2. Middle -tiered youth net-radio subculture: Seven youths who only access radio online and net-only radio.

Name	Country of residence	Homeland or parents' homeland
Natalie	Australia	Israel (parents' homeland)
Paula	Australia	Indonesia (homeland)
Mike	USA	Russia (parents' homeland)
Francis	USA	Philippines (homeland)
David	USA	Israel (homeland)
Diana	USA	Mexico (homeland)
Leanne	USA	USA (homeland)

in touch with her culture. ‘When I am listening to Mexican radio online stations I feel like I’m there and it’s a great, great feeling!’ she says.

Paula was born in Jakarta, Indonesia. Since arriving in Australia in 2004, Paula has been a regular listener of two Indonesian-based commercial radio online stations: ‘Hard Rock FM (<http://www.hardrockfm.com>) and *Prambors FM* (<http://www.pramborsfm.com>)’. Paula says listening to those stations ‘fills that gap that a part of me is missing back home. First of all it’s the language and then their topic of what is going on there, and then also the music, especially Indonesian music’. In 2005 Paula help set up a net-only radio station in Melbourne called ‘Indo-Melbourne’ for young Indonesians who were living abroad and studying in Melbourne.

Francis was so disappointed with some forms of traditional radio; he helped a friend set up a net-only radio station called *In the Crib* from their locale in Queens, New York City, for about US\$6000. The aim of *In the Crib* was to reach out to other DJs and musicians who fail to get the exposure in the mainstream. ‘I refuse to play major label records on my station. I hate commercial stations like Hot 97. I am hungry for new and out-there music . . . music you don’t heard [*sic*] on commercial radio’, he added. Francis linked his online network of 250 DJs from the United States and Canada to *In the Crib*’s website.

Francis displayed a visually spectacular style that emulates the model of resistance as espoused by traditionalists from the CCCS. Francis’ bricolage reflects what Hebdige (1979, 94–9) calls the ‘commodity form’ or ‘conversion of subcultural signs’ because his tribal dress code mimics the collage of resistant subcultures. Francis wore a branded baseball hat turned backward, a large, torn baggy T-shirt with ‘Number 92’ printed on it, faded jeans, a lot of earrings and gold chains, and colourful red and blue sneakers. Observing Francis in the face-to-face local alternative scene illustrated how his ‘neo-tribalism’ (Bennett 1999, 614) was actively imagined, created, and constructed. Francis is a music activist and along with famous African American DJs such as Afrika Bambaataa,³ Grand Wizzard Theodore,⁴ and Jazzy J,⁵ he led a huge rally at Union Square Park in the West Village against commercial hip hop station Hot 97 and its use of racist language while reporting the Asian Tsunami in December 2004.

Like the ‘softcore punks’ in Fox’s (1987, 350) study, *The Swingers* in this net-radio hierarchy are less dedicated to a (net-radio) counterculture, however, their degree of involvement in the subculture is higher than the lowest tier. Similar to the softcore punks, *The Swingers* do not hold the same social rebellious status and are dictated to by *The Radicals* (or the ‘hardcore punks’) whom they generally admire (Fox 1987, 350).

Highest tier (The Radicals)

Two participants (James and Sebastian), one from each country, are members of the highest tier, aptly called *the radicals* (see Table 7.3). This tier supports the traditionalist, CCCS notion that males are central players in resistant subcultures. In a similar vein to the punk movement from the 1970s, James’ and Sebastian’s opposition to mainstream music cultures is depicted in both ‘commodity form’ and ‘ideological form’ (Hebdige 1979, 90–4).

Table 7.3. Highest-tiered youth net-radio subculture: Two youths who only access net-only radio.

Name	Country of residence	Homeland or parents’ homeland
James	Australia	Australia (homeland)
Sebastian	USA	Puerto Rico (homeland)

The 'commodity form' or 'conversion of subcultural signs' is articulated in James' dress sense (Hebdige 1979, 94); his stray tails of black dreadlocks were askew beneath a Mao-style cap, and he wore a long, brown, communist-style, buttoned-up coat with a neck scarf. Also deeply embedded in the gay culture, James adopted a bricolage par excellence, reminiscent of the Beat Generation, Rastafarian, and punk movements.

As Barnard, Cosgrave and Welsh (1998; cited in Tacchi, Hartley, and Lewis 2004, 6) argue, there are intergenerational commonalities between youths during the 1960s and today: 'They are rebellious, risk-takers, idealistic and easily adaptive'. James embodies the 'ideological form' (Hebdige 1979, 94) via his involvement in the virtual subcultural music. 'Net-only radio is revolutionary by nature. It allows us to justify a rebellious mash-up of genre after genre, from underground punk, improvised noise. We are frustrated with mainstream music and are fighting against it!' James says.

Although this mentality is similar in tone to the deviant behaviour associated with the punk movement, James does not participate in antisocial acts of vandalism in public. James' 'ideological form' is more covert in the 'poetical context'. 'Net-only radio is one way of subverting mainstream cultures. It's art for art's sake. It breaks away from contrived media, media that has agendas', James said. He also adopts an anti-commercial ethos. 'E-commerce is associated with the corporate world. I would rather swap music files online with other net-radio enthusiasts and deal with small independent labels that specialize in rare records'.

The other member of this highest tier, Sebastian, is a key player in New York City's vibrant alternative music scene. Sebastian comes from the Bronx, where the hip hop and Gangsta rap movement expanded and evolved during the 1970s and 1980s. Sebastian set up a net-only radio station from his home in the Bronx, New York City. Called Shadow Radio (<http://www.shadownetwork.ath.cx/shadowradio>), the station was set up for US\$7000 in 1995. He bought a personal computer with a hard drive that holds 5000 songs for two days of streaming for about US\$5000 and a software package called Win Amp that places songs in a specific order for about US\$2000. 'I started off with 10 listeners because that is all Shadow Radio could hold, and now I am up to about 600,000 listeners per hour', Sebastian said. He tells how the hip hop and rap culture is still very big in the Bronx, and how he managed to convert youths from the Bronx to tune into Shadow Radio. 'I wanted to play my sort of music, that is, the weirdest and most intense music to the rest of the world', he explains.

Sebastian says, 'Net-only radio is about bringing alternative music genres to people who would probably never get to hear it'. He adds, 'Alternative music is not the same beat. It has layers. It is not one-layered and a linear kind of style of music'. Sebastian is also committed to the idea that net-only radio stations should continue to be a low-cost venture and resist corporate monopolization and government control:

Net-only radio stations were being taken over by corporate music because they see it as a way of making money. But the true net-only radio managers are not making any profit out of this or are not trying to. They might have some money coming in to help support their station, but now they're being overtaken by big-time radio stations like Yahoo Radio who are saying, "if you don't want commercials you pay us money so you don't have to hear commercials." Yahoo Radio's main purpose is not to serve you but to make money off you.

Similar to James, Sebastian is a music activist, and in 2005, he organized a 'radioathon' on Shadow Radio to raise money for the Tsunami victims. Sebastian sums up the qualities of the highest tier:

We are the Che Guevara of audio streaming, clandestine streaming that rebels against mainstream radio, against any form of constraint, structuralism, conformism, centralization,

oppression or even status quo. Hedonistic, chaotic and anarchic in our approach and business philosophy, accessing net-only radio is all about youth, energy and passion and a desire for a plethora of subversive, alternative music rarely heard on traditional radio.

It seems fitting that Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the Cuban leader who was Fidel Castro's revolutionary in the 1950s and later became a charismatic Foreign Minister and then an Argentine Marxist revolutionary, would be associated with this final net-radio tier. After his death, Che's stylized image became a ubiquitous countercultural brand symbol worldwide. Members of this highest tier are also like Fox's (1987, 350) 'hardcore punks' who were smallest in number but derived the greatest prestige from being involved in an anti-establishment lifestyle and a counterculture. Like hardcore punks, *The Radicals* of my study set the trends and defined the norms and accepted values of what the more innovative net-radio community stands for. Similar to Fox's (1987, 350) argument in her study of the US punk movement in the 1980s, I contend that in the mid-twenty-first century, a transnational youth net-radio subculture constitutes a 'near group' where the membership is 'impermanent and shifting' and 'not always clearly defined'. Members of this discursive net-radio hierarchy are part of a self-consciously identified and networked (but fragmented) 'scene'. They know of each, i.e. *The Conservatives* know of *The Radicals*, but are conscious of their rightful place in this hierarchy, a hierarchy defined by how much power users have over net-radio consumption and production practices, and their resistance to traditional radio formats.

Conclusion

This paper contextualizes the theoretical perspectives of youth subcultures using an empirically based study of a transnational youth net-radio hierarchy. It provides evidence that traditional theories of subculture and the notion of 'style' and coherent resistant practices as described by Hall and Jefferson (1976) and Hebdige (1979) are applicable to youths who belong to the highest tier, *The Radicals* – users who only access net-only radio users. Members of this highest tier are the 'hardcore' net-radio punks who are disenfranchised by traditional radio (Fox 1987, 350).

Theories related to postmodern subculturalism are also relevant to a study of youth net-radio users. The middle tier, *The Swingers* – those who access both radio online and net-only radio – are the 'softcore' net-radio punks in this study (Fox 1987, 350). They float between belonging to a resistant culture (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979) or 'taste cultures' (Thornton 1996, 8); they are youth diaspora or 'neo-tribes' (Bennett 1999, 614) who tap into individual and fluid 'scenes' from their cultural heartlands.

Finally, *The Conservatives* – those who access only radio online – form the lowest tier. They are primarily 'taste cultures' (Thornton 1996, 8), who are 'beyond centre/margins, the coloniser/colonised' and occupy a space previously confined to local geographical areas but now capable of travelling to virtual, global communities (Huq 2006, 41).

Gender, ethnicity and social class are key factors in this transnational youth net-radio subculture which constitutes a 'near group' where the membership is 'impermanent and shifting' and 'not always clearly defined' (Fox 1987, 350). Youth net-radio users in this case study belong to a discursive hierarchy which forms a 'continuum' (as opposed to an antagonism) between the subcultural view based on collective production (net-only radio users), and a post subcultural view based on individual transitory and internally fragmented consumption (radio online users). This article reflects that the analysis of social divisions of ethnicity and gender in youth subculture studies is critical because it reflects the complexity of youth's consumer choice.

Notes

1. The term 'college students' is often synonymous with tertiary students or university students. In this article I use the term college students.
2. Hayward (1995); Lind and Medoff (1999); Hendy (2000); Coyal (2000); Black (2001); Priestman (2002); Wall (2004); Sawhney and Seungwhan (2005); Kuhn (2002, 2006); Ren and Chan-Olmsted (2004); Kibby (2006); Atton (2004); Menduni (2007); Freire (2008).
3. Afrika Bambaataa, who helped with the rally, is a community leader from South Bronx. He was instrumental in the early development of hip hop throughout the 1970s and is considered to be the first rapper ever.
4. Grand Wizzard Theodore is credited as the inventor of scratching.
5. Jazzy Jeff is a hip hop and rhythm-and-blues record producer and turntablist. He is best known for his early career with Will Smith as half of DJ duo, Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince.

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