



## The Evolution of Styletribes: A Netnographic Analysis

Jessica Strubel, Sanjukta Pookulangara, University of North Texas, USA

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Today's technology enables consumers to trade millions of dollars, conduct online banking, access entertainment, and do countless other activities at the click of a button. Online social networks (SNS) have become a cultural phenomenon that allows for individualistic consumerism. People are increasingly utilizing social networking sites to share ideas, build communities, and contact fellow consumers who are similar to themselves. Most communication now takes place online, where the level of online contribution defines one's roles and status within the online community. Online communities especially serve as a new form of reference group that can have a significant influence on consumers buying decisions through electronic word of mouth (eWOM). These reference groups online can be termed as "neotribes" which is similar to subcultures. Contemporary leading theorists prefer the term *neotribe* or *styletribe* over subculture (Bennett, 2000). Styletribes are symbolic rather than functional and is typified by fluidity and interspersed gathering implying the quick movement of an individual from one subculture to another because of their constantly shifting style preferences in a society where deviation from the norm seems normal (Bennett, 2000; Malbon 1998). The purpose of this study was to explore information on the consumption of music related consumer cultures using netnography to provide a holistic perspective of online music communities and consumption.

Rationale of the study: The global music industry is worth \$168 billion annually ("How Much", 2011). Not only is information about music and performance disseminated online, but musical commodities are sold and traded online. The Internet not only provides a space for fans to engage freely with each other about the music and for bands to maintain communication with their fans and promoting their events, it is also an open space for subcultural commodification. The global apparel industry was estimated to be worth \$1.175 trillion at the end of 2011 and predicted to value at \$1.348 trillion by 2016. Approximately 9% of the total apparel market share is comprised of online/Internet sales (Sage, 2010). Because of the shift of subcultures to online styletribes, there is an obvious need to understand how online communities now act as primary reference groups and to what degrees that have an impact on consumer evaluations, aspirations, and purchase behaviors.

Results: Data was collected from public profiles of users on four music community websites using netnographic (Kozinets, 2002) methodology. Observations took place on the following websites:

1. *Dieselpunks.com* (a local website devoted to the Interbellum period and all things Dieselpunk)
2. *www.thesteampunkempire.com/forum* (A forum dedicated to aficionados of the Victorian era)
3. *www.goth.net/forums/* (A multi-faceted forum for all things gothic and steampunk)
4. *www.absolutepunk.net/forum.php* (A definitive source for punk rock news)

The following observations were recorded for twenty-five users from each of the four online communities: (1) number of posts; (2) number of community friends (if known); (3) duration of time in the community (if known); (4) theme of the discussions participated in or initiated (See Table 1). After analyzing the data the following themes emerged:

*The Nostalgia Factor:* There is an obvious difference between Steampunks and Dieselpunks and the Goths and Punks. Dress is central to the process of self-shaping, and the fantasy self becomes an essential part of the Steampunk or Dieselpunk identity. Their generic style has elements of DIY, but it is mostly in the form of ‘modding’ contemporary goods to make them look antique.

*Subcultural Commitment:* The Steampunks have the highest average number of friends, but the lowest average number of posts, demonstrating their lack of commitment to the community.

*Product Consumption:* The neotribes had the following distinct consumption patterns: (1) punks primarily purchase digital music and videos online; (2) Steampunks and Dieselpunks purchase ‘modded’/nostalgic apparel from online auction sites and craft networks; (3) Goths are searching for generic gothic attire preferably from online specialty stores catering to gothic needs.

Table 1. *Observations (n= 25 for each website)*

Statistics	Steampunkempire			Goth.net			Dieselpunk.org			AbsolutePunk		
	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max
Posts	165.52	1	2747	939.28	22	9249	217.84	2	2026	4453.08	34	44324
Friends	84.16	2	1243	—	—	—	20.8	4	171	16.68	0	103
Duration*	—	—	—	37.68	2	132	17.92	1	36	48.36	12	96

\* Duration is in months

**Conclusions and Implications:** According to this study and previous studies, there is an evident shift in subcultural community dynamics. Countercultures, which once led and shocked the world with fashion change, are no longer the visibly rebellious youth that once gathered in the streets for public display. They are now reticent, and often, passive consumers who prefer the comfort and safety of their home for communication with their community of choice. However, they have not abandoned the sartorial element that so readily defines subcultures. Their subcultural dress is reserved for weekends and demonstrates what Polhemus (1994) says is a tendency towards nostalgia, rather than anything novel. There is an obvious need for future research that would include a comparison between the online communities and the reality based communities to determine whether they maintain consistent behavioral patterns with regards to friendship patterns (reference group influencers), pre-purchase decision behaviors, and where they make their final purchases as a result of the previous two variables. Researchers can use the exchange of eWOM in online communities to gain great insight on consumers wants and needs, choices, issues, preferences of products or services, as well as areas in need of attention, change, or doing away with.

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