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Digital Subculture

A Geek Meaning of Style

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Recent scholarship in critical/cultural studies and ethnography has suggested studies of youth subculture can no longer be solely centered around musical preference and that the Internet may be a new resource for the affiliation and expression of subcultural identity. This study furthers this scholarship through the analysis of one such group: the "geeks." Through examination of Internet sites devoted to the subculture, this analysis argues that geeks who affiliate in self-assigned Web-based chat rooms demonstrate the characteristics, community, and style common to the expanding conceptualizations of Internet-based subculture. This study adds strength to the argument that the Internet can simultaneously be a gathering site for subculturalists and a medium for expression of subcultural identity.

Keywords: *subculture; cultural studies; geek; computer-mediated communication; virtual communities*

S tudies of youth subcultures during the past 30 years have typically coincided with studies of popular music preferences (Bennett, 1999; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000), and some of the most noteworthy youth movements were centered around preferences in music and associated styles (Bennett, 1999; K. Harris, 2000; Hodkinson, 2002). Subsequent scholars have auditioned other terms for subculture—*tribe* (Maffesoli, 1996), *scene* (Bennett, 1999; Straw, 1991), and *genre* (Hesmondalgh, 2005)—in an attempt to capture and define the essence of that which occurs when like-minded youth join together. Like *subculture*, most of these terms have been situated around groups centered on musical preference; however, some groups affiliate and create defined styles around preferences other than music.

Hesmondalgh (2005) argued for an end to the relationship between youth studies and studies of popular music. His assertion, framed in a critique of Bennett (1999), was that popular music and the study of popular music exist separately from youth studies and that because of its association with youth studies, the study of popular music has been hindered. As Hesmondalgh (2005) argued,

> The close relationship between the study of youth and that of popular music was the result of particular historical circumstances, and the privileging of youth in studies of music is an obstacle to a developed understanding of music and society. (p. 38)

This argument originates in the study of popular music: a field in which tastes and preferences have become more eclectic than ever before. Thereby, Anderson (2006) argued that the study of the relationship between music and culture has become unproductive given the nuanced and individualized world of pop culture.

Even though his interests are for the good of the field of music, his assertion has strong implications for youth studies as well. If Hesmondalgh's (2005) assertions are true, then researchers should be able to study groups of like-minded youth who are stylistically affiliated around something other than music. Toward this aim, Williams (2006) suggested that the Internet has become a medium for subcultural affiliation and the negotiation of social identity (Bandura, 1986) within cliques or groups. The use of the Internet as a resource for subcultures suggests that subcultures today are able to affiliate across location and time constraints.

This article offers one of these groups for study: the geeks. By analyzing the texts of self-identified geeks who affiliate through Web-based chat rooms, this study aims (a) to clarify and strengthen the argument for the Internet as a resource and medium for development of subcultures, (b) to begin to identify the geek subculture in the literature, and (c) to promote further research into the diversity of geek subcultures that are beginning to permeate mainstream culture.

Literature Review

This literature review first describes a brief history of the study of subcultures; second, defines the term *geek* as it exists in pop culture and in relation to this study; and third, addresses the role that the Internet plays in the existence of digital subcultures.

Studying Subcultures

In 1964, the University of Birmingham founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) to study what was then a burgeoning field: cultural studies. Among other scholars at the Birmingham school, Dick Hebdige (1979) issued an agenda for the study of subcultures, which he defined as a resistant response to mainstream culture. To exist as a subculture, a division should represent a solution to a particular problem or contradiction in dominant culture (p. 81). This solution is a sense of style that is a reaction to the invisibility of the subgroup. The new subculture then creates a culture of "conspicuous consumption" (p. 102), style as bricolage (p. 103), or semiotic guerilla warfare (p. 105). Hebdige's argument here is that subcultures

select various items from everyday mainstream culture and give those items new meaning by association with the subculture. For example, the mods in Great Britain appropriated through bricolage a set of items consisting of the Union Jack, professional dress, and motorized scooters as symbols of their subculture. These items were used in other sectors of British culture but became identified as mod through the conspicuous consumption of these items by members of the subculture. Hebdige studied subcultures by observation. In light of the sociopolitical unrest of the period, Hebdige was able to see style as a form of expression and resistance to the class structure in England.

Muggleton (2000), a former member of a punk subculture, challenged Hebdige and the CCCS, suggesting that the CCCS theorized youth subculture and situated these subcultures in systems of oppression, conflict, and exploitation. His problem with the CCCS model was that it studied subcultural style as the text of the study rather than studying the subculturalists themselves. Muggleton sought to reframe the study of subculture by talking directly to those involved. He interviewed members of punk and mod subcultures in England to understand how they defined their groups. The current study proceeds in the same fashion, taking direct quotes from the members of the geek subculture, only doing so in a "high-tech" fashion by studying Web content posted by self-identified geeks.

Like Muggleton, other theorists have challenged or expanded the CCCS model of subculture. Some have even gone so far as renaming subcultures. Building on Maffesoli (1996), Bennett (1999) offered "neo-tribes" to replace subcultures (p. 606). This neo-tribalism exists in a way of life that is typically associated with a semi-stable community. This way of life is one of fluidity, not bound by the inclusionary-exclusionary definitions offered by Hebdige and Muggleton. If Hebdige valued resistance and Muggleton values individualism, then Bennett values fluidity.

These issues of resistance, individualism, and fluidity permeate current academic discussion of affiliation and subculture. This research project does not attempt to enter into this ongoing debate but rather acknowledges it and the intriguing repercussions it brings for the study of affiliation. Instead, this study builds on one of the adjacent arguments of such debate: the distancing of the concepts of subculture and musical preference (Hesmondalgh, 2005; Redhead, 1990; Williams 2006).

Hesmondalgh (2005) offered a question to other researchers, specifically Bennett: What else besides musical collectivity can define subcultural style? Basing his response on the research of Born (2000), Hesmondalgh offered an answer in passing: "Meanwhile, other writers are using the term [subculture] to denote a cultural space that transcends locality" (p. 29). Hesmondalgh's research further breaks down the essence of subculture into the ideas of distinctiveness, commitment, autonomy, and like-mindedness within a particular group. He then offers his own term, "genre," to the mix. Nevertheless, his focus is an attempt to separate music from youth studies.

Williams (2006) carries Hesmondalgh's (2005) claim from theory to application through his study of the straightedge subculture. His research suggests that the

Internet, like music, creates a meeting ground for groups of like-minded youth. His contention, that "Internet forums simultaneously function as a subcultural resource, a form of subcultural expression, and a medium for subcultural existence for young people outside music scenes," is a worthy one for continued study (p. 194). Thus, this article assesses this claim through the study of a subculture created through the Web: groups of self-labeled "geeks" who seek out community online.

Being a "Geek"

The term *geek* has a sordid history as a label for carnival sideshow freaks (Sugarbaker, 1998). In more contemporary times, it, like the term *nerd*, was an insult used to degrade and belittle intelligent outcasts. These outcasts were labeled because of their expertise and general lack of social skills. But recently, "geek" has become an endearing term of affection (and perhaps jealousy) and label for those who demonstrate expertise in a certain field. Sugarbaker (1998) follows the timeline of this progression by quoting an anonymous writer (and geek) on the subject:

> I suspect that it's growing up back when "geek" was simply a vicious insult used by schoolchildren fully aware of the word's sideshow origins (long before computers gave "geekiness" a certain hip patina), that combines with my short stint as a roustabout and pitch-penny frontman in a traveling carnival, to make me a bit uncomfortable about being called a "geek." (par. 5)

The transition from geek-as-sideshow-freak to geek-as-intelligent-expert has moved the term from one of insult to one of endearment.

In pop culture, the stereotypical image of "geek" has also made this transition. Students of popular culture can identify quickly the "geekiest" icons from mainstream television: Samuel "Screech" Powers (*Saved by the Bell* and its spin-offs), Steve Urkel (*Family Matters*), Mary Katherine Gallagher (*Saturday Night Live*), Andrea Zuckerman (*Beverly Hills 90210*), the entire cast of *Freaks and Geeks*, and the men of *Beauty and the Geek*. Given the social isolation experienced by some of these aforementioned geeks, some contemporary geeks are experiencing a resurgence of popularity. Grossman (2005) of *Time Magazine* reports on the attractiveness of today's geeks: "There are women, it is said, who find *The O.C.*'s Seth Cohen sexy, and men who feel the same way about bespectacled *SNL*er Tina Fey" (p. 98).

Like Grossman, the greater culture—through media portrayals of geeks and the rise of the computer—has been reinventing the term *geek* for many years. What was once geek has now become chic. Moreover, the term *geek* has been used in relationship to some of the players in the political economy of computer-based communication. The pioneers of computer systems and software and the founders of popular Web-based services such as Google and Facebook have carried this appellation to positions of power and wealth in American economy.

Given the rise of geek chic, the question of the definition of *geek* is one of great importance to this study. Sugarbaker (1998) makes the claim that "perhaps one of the identifying traits of geek culture is the fact that its participants are active rather than passive" (par. 22). This statement tells a great deal about geek culture. The geek is one who becomes an expert on a topic by will and determination. Thus, geeks can be found in specific groups and spaces that are classically "geekish," such as *Star Trek* and comic book conventions, computer-based chat rooms, and Mensa conferences. These sites have been stereotyped as sites for community among intelligent experts. But geeks can also be found among groups in which expertise is required. To be geek is to be engaged, to be enthralled in a topic, and then to act on that engagement. Geeks come together based on common expertise on a certain topic. These groups might identify themselves as computer geeks, anime geeks, trivia geeks, gamers, hackers, and a number of other specific identifiers. Regardless of classification, these geeks share the experience of being experts (Sugarbaker, 1998).

These geek-experts have created their own criteria for labeling geeks. The *Geek Code* (Hayden, 1996) and the *Geek Quiz* (Innergeek, 2006) offer prospective geeks the opportunity to rate their own "geekiness" in relation to others. These definitive documents provide a self-described identity for geeks.

For the purposes of this study, the authors have isolated only one type of geek from the ever-increasing diversity of geeks. This group of geeks will be defined by their self-identification as "geeks" in Internet-based chat rooms. Thus, this group of geeks is not the same group of geeks that one might find in the other subculturalist meeting spaces listed above.

The Role of the Internet

Interpersonal interaction on Internet-based sites affirms the collective identities of the groups who congregate therein (Rheingold, 2000). These identities are shaped by the values and beliefs espoused and supported by the members of these groups. Thus, the Internet provides an opportunity for would-be members of cultural groups to seek out like-minded individuals. Williams (2006) argues, "For individuals who do not participate in face-to-face scenes, however, the internet is more than a medium; it is a social space through which personal and social identities are constructed, given meaning, and shared through the ritual of computer-mediated interaction" (p. 195), suggesting that those who need to find affiliation attain it through computer-mediated communication.

Computer-mediated communication carries with it some challenges for small group communication. The synchronicity, media richness, and social presence available through the medium shape the interactions that occur (T. E. Harris & Sherblom, 2005). Synchronicity refers to the ability of the interactions to occur in real time (synchronous communication) or in intervals of convenient times among members (asynchronous). The texts analyzed in this study are generally considered asynchronous

unless all members of the chat room happened to be online at the same time. Media richness refers to the amount of detail that a medium carries about the members of a group. For example, face-to-face communication is very rich (words, voice, gesture), whereas telephone conversation is less rich (words, voice) and text-based conversation as seen in chat rooms is very lean on detail (only words). Social presence is the ability of the medium to create a social and emotional connection between members of a small group. The amount of social presence developed is related to both the medium and the ability of the users to effectively correspond within the medium.

These challenges affect the subcultures that are engaged in online conversation rather than face-to-face conversation. However, Williams (2006) suggests that Internet sites are becoming more relevant to subcultural development both as a resource for affiliation and as a medium for subcultural identity.

Based on these understandings of subcultures, geeks, and online chat, this study posits that groups of geeks engaged in online chat constitute a subculture. Furthermore, the study of such geek subculture can advance the conceptualization of subcultures in a digital era and the understanding of the relationship between subcultures and their places of interaction.

Method

This research project observes subculturalists through a text-based content analysis of their interactions occurring in online chat space. For the purposes of this study, the texts analyzed were chosen through their appearance in one of four geek-focused Web sites that were designed as geek chat spaces by geeks. These four Web sites were chosen because they appeared repeatedly on various Web searches for "geek" in October 2006, they contained forums for live and asynchronous chat between site users, and they self-identified as sites for geeks.

Each of these Web sites had multiple forums for chat titled things such as "games," "products," "entertainment," and "general chat." This research focused on comments made and archived in the general chat forum on each Web site. The general chat forums were chosen for three reasons: (a) they typically had a higher volume of posts than those of subject specific forums, (b) they had ongoing conversations dating back several months and continuing steadily until the time of the study, and (c) they tended to have more conversations about the qualities of geekness than those forums that discussed products, games, and so on. The author also visited other forums on the Web site when conversations on other forums were referenced by texts posted in the general forum.

When searching the selected forums, the author coded posts that offered comments about geek culture (e.g., What does it mean to be a geek? How do people realize they are geeks? How do geeks interact with each other?) and comments that related to the medium of communication between geeks (e.g., What does the digital medium have

to offer geeks? How does correspondence in the digital medium transfer to the other types of communication among these geeks?). In addition, the author coded comments that indicated qualities of subcultures identified in previous research, including resistance to dominant culture, style, and conspicuous consumption. Thereby, this study attempted to use a wide variety of comments from across the sites, but, when necessary, the forums and comments concerning geek culture were privileged over forums and comments concerning the technical nature of specific subject matter.

Given the dynamic and impermanent nature of Web space, the author notes that the results of any given research concerning chat spaces are likely to change daily. This research occurred in the months of October through December 2006. The listing of identified geeks referenced in this article and their affiliations with the selected Web sites have been kept confidential, so all of their user names have been altered to protect their identities. To preserve the stylistic capitalization and spacing choices of these geeks on the Web sites, their "names" have been italicized when they appear in the subsequent text. In addition, the quotations included herein are copied verbatim to preserve stylistic spelling, punctuation, and grammatical choices.

Results

Geek Culture

The geeks represented in this study are generalist geeks who embrace their identification as geeks. Comments such as this one, written by *Pri*, are present throughout the sites: "I would say I'm an anime geek, a gamer geek and a half a dozen other types of geek, a geek of all trades if you will." This study has previously defined this group of geeks as those self-identified geeks who affiliate in chat rooms for social interaction. *Pri*'s comment and others like it echo this definition and express the variety and diversity of geeks who chat online.

RTIMJB says, "My name is Laura. I am glad to find this site. I always have known I was a Geek, but it is more fun to be one when you embrace it." This self-identification is one of the core characteristics of geeks in online chat rooms. Discussions about the process of becoming a geek is well documented in the texts. *Edwina* writes, "I never considered myself a geek until today when my professor in my Economics of Public Policies told me I was the geekiest student he had ever met." Upon identification by an outsider, *Edwina* joined the geek chat room. *Panish* sums up the feelings of those in the geek subculture: "Everyone is a geek to some extent, enjoying excelling in a certain field is technically being "geeky." actual geeks just use it as a compliment, i do."

Because self-identification is so very important to this subculture, challenges arise to those who participate in chat rooms but are not geeks. One in particular, *fredwind06*, entered a comment saying that she was not a geek because she was too

popular to be a geek. Her comment met harsh criticism from *Sugarbakke* who wrote, "Why do you enter a geek website's forum for geeks if you are not a geek? there's no such thing as popularity, it's just what average (never say normal) people name mentally challenged girls (in other words, blondes)."

However, *Sugarbakke* was immediately challenged by a more established geek, *free_9010*, who had another rationale for the post: "[*fredwind06*] posted because they are an idiot, obviously. Probably in need of some sort of power trip, they posted this self-righteously weakminded entry in happy obliviousness to the concept of geeks actually choosing the label of geek." Geeks within the subculture feel strongly about their status of geeks and welcome each other tentatively into the group.

Digital Medium and Its Relationship to Interaction

For many of the geeks in these chat spaces, meeting in person was nearly impossible. *requium* lives in the Philippines, *Diana* in England, *Sugarbakke* in Argentina, and *Freelancer* in the Czech Republic. Yet all are able to unite in the chat space that creates a gathering point and common ground for this subculture. Virtual space has several distinct qualities in chat rooms. Chat rooms can be effective across time and space. The four geeks listed above can find a common meeting space in a chat room regardless of what time they are connected to the Internet in their various countries around the world. Echoes of the Hesmondalgh (2005) argument ring clearly here for the geeks: "Meanwhile, other writers are using the term [subculture] to denote a cultural space that transcends locality" (p. 29). Clearly, the chat space used by geeks can be considered a space of subculture according to Hesmondalgh's claim.

Interestingly, some geeks in virtual space studied often discuss interacting in the real world. Annika writes,

> I bought a pack of 18 christmas cards, and it turns out I only know 8 people. anyway, if you trust a girl you've never met enough to send me your address via PM you may end up with a card in your mailbox.

Her post garnered responses from no less than 15 other people who exchanged addresses to create a physical Christmas card mailing list for a group of people who interact in virtual space. Later comments demonstrated receipt of *Annika*'s cards, which unfortunately left glitter stuck in recipients' keyboards. *Annika* vowed to put a "glitter warning" on next year's cards.

This type of sociability was echoed by others in the space. *Eloquent* writes, "We tend to really show up on ppl's doorsteps, often only preceeded with an IM 'Im around you and lost, where do you live and Ill show up.'" The interaction of geeks involved in these online chat spaces allowed geeks to transcend locality and time but also allowed these geeks to congregate for planned or unplanned events.

Qualities of Subcultures

Resistance. This subculture of geeks in chat rooms demonstrates resistance to the mainstream culture in terms of appearances and entertainment. *Sugarbakke*'s previously referenced post speaks to the idea of resistance to appearances: "There's no such thing as popularity, it's just what average (never say normal) people name mentally challenged girls (in other words, blondes)." In this case, *Sugarbakke* is responding to a chat room post from a nongeek who writes, "I am to popular to be a geek." *Sugarbakke* in one post attacks average, normal, and blonde people, suggesting that this subculture of geeks rejects the average in favor of those who resist the normal. Other posts echo this sentiment and the need for affiliation in a group that is difficult to find in mainstream culture. These selected quotes from across the four sites are representative of this conversation:

> *requium*: I hope I can make geek friends here, because none of my friends are that geeky.
> *Freelancer*: my friends are complete opposites of geeks, so they're discussing topics like the Czech version of American Idol there.
> *Simian*: My friends think I'm odd, and, quite frankly, I agree.
> *Diana*: I met my fiance on a Star Trek chat room, and he's nearly as geeky as I am.

Geeks in these chat rooms are seeking out affiliation with like-minded individuals. They are using the Internet as a site for connection to others who share their "geekiness."

Conspicuous consumption. These geeks see great potential in their abilities but note that their abilities are limited by age and access to resources. *Urban Cowboy* is aware of her level of geekness: "I'm only 13 (14 on March 1st), and in eighth grade, so I have a long time before I reach my full geeky potential." *Yoshiro* also references potential:

> My [innergeek.us geekness] test score is 63.11637, but rises by 10.45365 points when I check all the things I would *like* to do or own had I only the necessary resources; sadly, as a poor college student I am limited in my geekiness.

Unlike *Urban Cowboy*, who offers age as a limiting factor for potential, *Yoshiro* implies that consumer power is an equally limiting factor for the potential of geeks. This comment is reminiscent of the Hebdige (1979) claim of subculture as "conspicuous consumption" (p. 102). Part of being in the geek community is the requirement that one has the ability to purchase or at least access the necessary resources. Analysis of other interest-specific forums on the Web sites in future research may supplement this analysis of conspicuous consumption as these geeks discuss their favorite products, entertainment, and computer equipment.

Style. Hebdige (1979) and Muggleton (2000) both consider style an important part of subculture—important enough to list style as a subtitle to subculture in the titles of each of their works. Given the importance of style to subculture studies, one key "text" to study must concern geek use of style. Instead of the music, dress, and physical interaction referenced by Hebdige and Muggleton, the geek subculture's style is reflected by each geek's portrayal of self in avatar form and user name. Because user names can be a private and personal identifier for the users of chat rooms, user names of these geeks were removed from this study. However, many of the geeks depicted herein discussed the process of selecting a user name and wrote about the selection of their user names with proud, descriptive language.

The majority of geeks studied chose to represent themselves with an avatar in animated form. Thereby, these animated texts become a crucial text for the study of geek style. Only one used a nonanimated image, but this image is a screen capture from a popular television show rather than a photograph of the person represented. Regardless, it is this style that is important.

Geeks who self-identify have no style requirements for their physical person in this online environment but rather represent themselves stylishly through anime, drawings, and other digitally created icons. Intricate human animations were characteristic of many of the avatars. Hebdige's (1979) concept of "style as bricolage" (p. 103) characterizes these animations and the other avatars selected by these geeks. Style as bricolage is the concept that subculturalists will select items from mainstream culture to represent their own personal style. In the case of these chat rooms, the majority of users have used animation as a common style. The majority used images common to or crafted in a style reminiscent of the Japanese animation of hand-drawn or computer-assisted human figures widely known as anime. Others borrowed iconic characters from pop culture for their avatars (the fraggles, Winston Churchill, and popular comics such as Garfield and Maggie Simpson are all represented). The avatars come straight from popular culture through the imagery of fame, comics, and anime. This bricolage, the collection and appropriation of items from mainstream culture, adds to the perceived style of these geeks.

Other findings. One commonality to every chat space visited was conflict arising between members concerning assessments of people, products, and equipment common to many members. In another chat space, controversy erupted over *Windstorm*'s assessment of a new online game. This is the ensuing conversation, in order:

> *Windstorm*: Here's all the info I need to know the game will probably suck: Makers of Advent Children; Overly stylish animu bullcrap emo fag main character with multiple swords; Engine sword. . . . Much like how some people try their hardest to avoid games involving bald space marines, it is my duty to try to avoid stupid overly stylish animu bullshit like this.

> *Figaro*: If the game sucks when it comes out, so be it, don't play it. Why do you continue to concern yourself . . . when all you're planning to do is nitpick over every little thing that you dislike? It's like your automatic reaction.
>
> *Cypher*: i don't know why i keep checking these threads . . . its the same bullshit in each and every one
>
> *Mockingbird*: *shrugs* I just think it's a very fun, light-hearted game that tells a good story with a lot of fan-appeal.

This heated discussion continued for several more posts and represents the types of discussions surrounding personal assessments of products designed for mainstream culture relating to the subculture. Interestingly, *Windstorm* ended up receiving infractions: demerits imposed by users and moderators of the chat space (enough infractions can cause a user to forfeit chat room privileges). Such infractions seemed to be a common event on this particular Web site. *Anawana* commented, "Ooh! Ooh! I want to be next in line to give *Windy* an infraction," indicating that infractions as punishment against *Windstorm* are a relatively frequent occurrence.

Through affiliation with the sites, these geeks are able to engage in the type of fluidity espoused by Bennett (1999) by including like-minded others and excluding those who either violate the norms (however briefly, like *Windstorm*, above) or who do not buy into or understand the common language of these chat spaces.

One interesting subplot of this particular dialogue is the tendency of one subculture to attack another, establishing both groups as viable subcultures. In this case, *Windstorm* negatively references the "emo" subculture: "Overly stylish animu bullcrap emo fag main character with multiple swords." Hebdige (1979) depicts several subculture clashes including a musically based one between punks and teddyboys. In our case, the clash is between *Windstorm*, a geek, who degrades overly stylish animations, and his perception of emo, a musically based subculture that values style and emotion over functionality.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the texts of self-identified geeks who affiliate through Web-based chat rooms, this study aids in (a) clarifying and strengthening the argument for the Internet as a resource and medium for development of subcultures, (b) identifying geek subculture in the literature, and (c) promoting further research into the diversity of geek subcultures that are beginning to permeate mainstream culture.

First, the use of online environments as a meeting space can aid researchers in considering subcultures of many types and in considering how the Internet may serve as a medium for subcultural development. Subcultures other than that consisting of these geeks are using Web sites and chat rooms as virtual environments for interaction between people with similar interests. Studies of the organization,

politics, and relative authority of these Web sites may help researchers understand further complexities of subcultures existing in the digital world. Subcultures within online communities differ from subcultures centered around music. The physical interaction and the tangible sense of style present in subcultures are lost when those subcultures enter digital space. But those elements are reinscribed by the subculturalists in virtual ways, allowing style to become digital and interaction to become based on access to the Internet rather than physical proximity. Such reinscription is exactly what researchers might expect from subcultures that have consistently recreated their styles in culture through bricolage and conspicuous consumption. Researchers can consider the mutual impact that subcultures and the digital medium of the Internet have on each other.

Second, this study has introduced the literature surrounding subculture to the geeks. As Hayden (1996) writes,

> So you think you are a geek, eh? The first step is to admit to yourself your geekiness. No matter what anyone says, geeks are people too; geeks have rights. So take a deep breath and announce to the world that you are a geek. Your courage will give you strength that will last you forever. (par. 1)

Self-proclaimed geeks have captured the once derogatory term and put it to use as a term of power, even creating levels of geekness. Some of these classifications include the Geek Code (Hayden, 1996) and, as previously mentioned, the Geek Quiz (Innergeek, 2006) which lets prospective geeks test their level of geekness. (The author scored an 18.14596% on the quiz, squarely within the category of geek.) A higher level of geekness can mean higher status and greater pride in one's self as a self-identified geek.

Clearly, the community of geeks can be considered a subculture. Or, rather, the term *subculture* has some applicability to the community of geeks on the Internet. These geeks have created a solution to their lack of affiliation through the use of self-created sites on the Internet. Moreover, their style and resistance are not directly tied to music but rather to these cultural spaces and their search for affiliation. For the geeks, these are the ties that hold the community together as technological savvy and skill become a larger part of mainstream culture. Nevertheless, the geeks persevere as a subculture by becoming experts in these fields, identifying themselves in relation to their expertise (anime geeks, hackers, gamers, Trekkies, etc.) or their search for this expertise. In light of Hesmondalgh (2005) and Williams (2006), the nature of subcultures and the role of cultural spaces in cultural studies beckon for further research. In these discussions of subcultures, examples, such as the geeks, emerge that both confirm and challenge our notions of subcultures and their roles in shaping mainstream society.

Finally, the identification of the geek subculture within this study is a narrow analysis of four Web sites devoted to generalist geeks. Groups of geeks with different

expertise affiliate around a variety of interests. This study is a beginning point for understanding the differences within the label of "geek" as it breaks down into many subcultures, including the self-identified chat room–based group of geeks.

The Internet is an accessible and user-friendly arena in which subcultures can form, meet, and interact. The geeks in this study demonstrate only some of the ways that this technology can engage with and inform the study of subcultures. Further study of subcultural spaces of geeks and other groups on the Internet may help to inform researchers about contemporary subcultures and their new digital meanings of style.

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