# The Symbiotic Relationship between a Subculture and a Particular Musical Genre

*Junyu Xue*

Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

xuejy23@mail2.sysu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Subculture, as a kind of cultural form formed outside the mainstream culture, is shaped by specific groups based on common interests, values and lifestyles. The popularity of the Internet and social media has not only accelerated the collection and dissemination of subculture groups but also reshaped the symbiotic mode between subculture and music genres—from the closed communication of underground scenes to the global and instant digital interaction. This transformation not only provides subculture music with unprecedented creative freedom and communication efficiency, but also makes it face the dual challenges of commercial incorporation and cultural dilution. This paper aims to reveal the changes of the symbiotic relationship between subculture and music genre in the digital age, and focuses on three core questions: How do subculture and music genre interact? How does digital technology affect the production and dissemination path of subculture music? What is the impact of commercial intervention on the symbiosis mode of the two? The study attempts to provide new ideas for understanding the development path of subculture through an interdisciplinary perspective, and at the same time, it proposes practical enlightenment for balancing the commercial logic of the music industry with the spiritual value of subculture, so as to help the sustainable development of multicultural ecology in the information age.

**Keywords:** subculture music genre, digital technology commercialization

## 1. Introduction

The symbiotic relationship between subculture and music has always existed, and music has always been the core medium for subculture groups to express values and gather identity. With the continuous development of digital technology, such as the algorithm recommendation of music platform and the nationalization of ai music software, the transmission speed of subculture music is greatly accelerated, which not only reshapes the communication mode of music, but also restructures the interaction mode between subculture and music genres. Meanwhile, the "post-Internet generation maintains an organic and symbiotic relationship to the Internet... their identities shaped by digital spaces" [1]. The involvement of commercial forces also affects the symbiotic rules of subculture and music. When minority music is extracted, its cultural symbols are used with luxury advertising background music or simplified into "15-second short video" by algorithm, the spiritual core of subculture's resistance to mainstream culture is faced with the risk of assimilation and dissolution. This paper aims to focus on the dual factors of digital technology and commercialization, starting from the symbiotic relationship between subculture and fixed music genres, and providing a new direction for the study of subculture from an interdisciplinary perspective. It aims to pay attention to the subjective initiative given by digital technology to young people, and to provide reference for the development of the music industry and cultural industry. An attempt to answer: How do subcultures construct identities through music genres? How is subculture music produced and disseminated in the context of the digital age? And how will the intervention of commercialization change the symbiosis between the two?

## 2. Literature Review

Based on qualitative analysis, this paper systematically discusses the symbiotic relationship between subculture and music genre in the digital age. Through EBSCO, Web of Science, ProQuest and other four Chinese and English databases, this paper systematically combs the Chinese and English journals, literature, case studies and industry reports from 2015 to 2024, focusing on the aspects of "music communication in the digital age" and "the impact of commercialization on subcultures". In addition,

case studies are carried out for some subculture types and music types. It is committed to objectively presenting the dynamic interactive relationship between subculture and music, and providing methodological reference for future research on related culture.

## 2.1. Production and Dissemination of Subculture Music in the Digital Age

Subculture music is a cultural form that confronts the restrictions and constraints of mainstream culture through different personalized musical expressions, such as the noise aesthetics in punk, the poverty style imitated by hippies, and the construction of identity by distorted guitars and rebellious lyrics in the underground rock circles of China in the 1990s. Simultaneously, subculture music also has a social or group identity function, through common or different aesthetic preferences, for example, heavy metal fans are most likely to collect "vinyl" records, which successfully creates a sense of belonging to the group.

"Labels are losing much of their importance and artists are more capable of promoting themselves, granting them more ownership over their own work"[2] In the digital age, there has also been a paradigm shift in how subculture music is produced. With the emergence of multi-track recording technology and electroacoustic instruments, many music Producers can choose to create music at home, which not only reduces the cost of music   production, but also greatly improves the freedom of creation. Gradually, a new phenomenon of "Bedroom Producers" music production has formed, which makes music production become universal. DAW software, such as Ableton Live and FL Studio, has greatly lowered the professional threshold of composing, arranging and mixing music. Under this transformation, Lo-Fi HipHop, a music genre that has risen rapidly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, has quickly become the new darling of music lovers around the world.

After the emergence of various artificial intelligence applications, AI tools for music production have gradually entered the public's attention, so the creation of subculture music is becoming more and more "popular." Music making software, such as Suno AI and Beatoven, just need to input a short description and the desired music style to help you create popular songs one after another. The cost of producing a song has dropped dramatically, which has led to a rapid boom in the field.

Along with the rise of music-making tools are social media and short-form video platforms, which enable subculture music to spread more quickly and widely, creating the famous "circle breaking effect". Media consumers worldwide are now exposed to a bewildering array of music from all manner of diverse cultures, subcultures and epochs... This has enabled local, lower-class and marginal peoples to make their voices heard as never before" [3]    TikTok's algorithm has enabled niche music, such as *"Yuve Yuve Yu"* by The Mongolian heavy metal band The Hu, to go viral on short video platforms, quickly breaking the circle and gaining a lot of plays and likes. At the same time, with the spread of subculture music, the corresponding subculture can also get better publicity. As Alfrey [4] pointed   out, "New media technologies and the global exchange of goods has dramatically expanded opportunities for identity signaling.". The    geo-culture of different regions and even countries can be active again in the eyes of the world in another way. *"Nyege Nyege,"* an electronic music label from East Africa, spreads to the world through extremely fast beats, dynamic drums, and cheerful ethnic styles, allowing more people to hear the unique electronic music style from East Africa.

## 2.2. The Interaction between Subculture and Music Genre

"Subcultural identities are performative because the extraordinary identities subcultural members express do not precede or account for their core, fixed, stable and unified identities, rather grounded in their performances that are carried out within a social context..." [5]. As the "identity label" of subculture, music expresses the core characteristics of subculture in a subtle way, while subculture groups convey and express their identity and core values through their iconic music works. Music can function as an identity marker... enhancing a self confidence that enables critical assimilation, rather than authoritarian dismissal" [6]. Subculture music uses lyrics and themes of specific musical genres, such as *"Save the Queen"*, a masterpiece of punk band Sex Pistols, which shows the "rebellious spirit" with sharp lyrics or noise, as well as the impact on mainstream culture. These works are widely spread and sung on social media, so that the genes of the subculture are passed on from generation to generation and avoid being assimilated by the mainstream culture. The innovation of digital technology also provides a new way for the preservation and dissemination of subculture music. The underground rock scene that emerged in China in the 1990srelied on tapes and underground shows to spread, but this mode of transmission still has its limits. With the rapid development of platforms such as NetEase Cloud and QQ Music, algorithmic streaming has brought underground rock back into the public eye and attracted a certain number of new listeners.

And subculture groups continue to develop their music through continuous innovation and practice. Subcultures are not only consumers of music, but also sources of inspiration for music innovation. As subcultures continue to evolve with the mainstream of society, they break rules and incorporate multiple cultures and technologies in many ways. While developing their own culture, subcultures are constantly injecting fresh blood into music and even reshaping the aesthetic standards of the mainstream market. Miernik [7] claims in her analysis of Emo punk music, which originated in the United States in the 1980s, has become a vehicle for young people to express their inner anxiety with its emotional lyrics (such as self-doubt, loneliness and sadness) and complex melodic guitar arrangements. "Stylistically, it employs elements of indie-rock, goth and punk... black-rimmed glasses, slim-fit trousers (often in plaid) ... Members often sported an androgynous look with makeup. These elements were combined with mass-

consumed products like Apple devices and licensed pop-culture icons". Showing a diversified development trend and spreading to all parts of the world. Influencing the lifestyle and aesthetics of many young people. The subculture keeps feeding its music genre because it is not bound by commercial rules, dares to use new technologies that mainstream culture does not dare to try, and boldly uses cross-border artistic collaboration to provide new possibilities for music." De la Rosa [8] claims in her analysis of rock songs that "Individuals might have eudaimonic motivations to consume lyrics that mainly make reference to negative complex emotions". This psychological mechanism is also applicable to understanding how musical expressions of hurt emotions in the Emo subculture can become emotional substitutes for younger groups.

## 2.3. Evolution of Symbiotic Patterns in the Context of Commercialization

The rapid development of commercialization has also influenced the connection between subcultures and fixed music genres. More and more creators of subculture music choose to upload their works to short video platforms, thus gaining more traffic and attention, which invisibly greatly increases the exposure of these subcultures. Big companies and brands are also using subculture music for their own promotional purposes. Gucci has used transversal techno music as background music in advertisements to attract a wider range of customers. But too much commercialization has brought its own risks. "When their subculture is commercialized and exposed to the mass market, insiders experience nothing less than a loss of identity because their sense of themselves depends on an opposition to 'the mainstream'" [9]. This kind of mode only uses "symbol extraction" to extract the visual or musical elements will make the subculture lose its unique rebellious spirit against the mainstream culture. Brand advertising tends to use only part of the elements of the subculture and the product itself to publicize, without digging deeply into the spiritual connotation of the subculture. At the same time, the situation of traffic domestication is also emerging. In order to better communicate through algorithms on social media, music producers tend to write more conservative lyrics that are more acceptable to the public. In order to gain further exposure, music producers choose more concise arrangements, "Commercialization dissolves, rather than reinforces, "commercialization dissolves, rather than reinforces, the boundaries between the deviant and the normal; mainstream culture  is increasingly saturated with images of deviance that no longer seem shocking or provocative" [9]. Subculture music is being honed by commercialization while gaining traffic through commercialization. While enjoying the dividends of rapid dissemination brought by traffic, they are also replacing the essence of subculture in the process, so as to choose elements more in line with the public aesthetic." Digital platforms enable global dissemination but also breed homogeneity through algorithmic pressure"[6].  If the relationship between subculture and music genre used to be mutually beneficial, now under the background of algorithmic leadership and data decision, more exposure data and audience data are used to determine the direction of music style. The development of subculture tends to integrate with the mainstream culture in the commercialization and exposure of social media. Therefore, commercial capital exerts environmental selection pressure on subculture and its music, which makes its symbiosis forma evolutionary system tending to continuous dynamic adjustment rather than a stable and balanced development.

## 3. Discussion

In order to break the current deadlock in the commercialization of subculture music and digital platforms, we need to re-examine the core values of subculture. The essence of subculture music lies in its rebelliousness and uniqueness, which should not be drowned out by the tide of commercialization. Creators should insist on digging deep into the spiritual connotation of subculture, rather than just staying at the level of symbols and bowing to traffic data. In terms of communication, subculture music should actively explore diversified communication channels and avoid over-reliance on short video platforms and social media algorithms. Through offline performances, independent music festivals and other forms, subculture music can interact with audiences more directly and maintain its original cultural vitality. Subculture music should focus on dialogue with mainstream culture, rather than simple integration. Through creative cross-border cooperation, it is possible to expand its influence while maintaining its uniqueness. For example, the combination with art forms such as film and theater can provide new expression space for subculture music. In short, subculture music should break the deadlock of commercialization and re-establish its unique position in the cultural ecology by adhering to core values, diversified dissemination, academic cooperation and creative crossover.

## 4. Conclusion

Therefore, the symbiotic relationship between subculture and specific music genres is essentially the result of three factors: cultural expression, technological change and social demand. Music is the core carrier of subculture communication and the construction of identity. By choosing different types of music, subculture groups integrate their unique aesthetic concepts and the expression of lyrics, and realize the complement of the missing parts of mainstream culture. Whether it is the pioneering creative spirit of electronic music or the unique noise style of punk music, music has always been an important tool for subculture groups to communicate and transmit their values. With the rapid development of digital technology, the development of subculture breaks through regional restrictions through social media and various streaming media platforms, turning from regionalization to globalization.

Digital technology also reconstructs the production and dissemination of subculture music. Under the trend of increasingly "popular" AI composition tools, the threshold for music creation has been greatly reduced, making subculture music shift from "professional monopoly" mastered by a small number of professionals to "universal participation." The viral spread of short video platforms has broken the channel barriers of the traditional music industry, which relies on record companies and other traditional music industries. This kind of change allows more people to join in the creation of subculture music, and also promotes the diversification of music styles, making more minority cultures exposed, recognized and given opportunities for cross-cultural communication. However, the development of digital technology will also bring the risk of convergence. The algorithms of streaming media platforms may force creators to cater to the traffic and the public aesthetic, thus reducing the rebellious spirit and uniqueness of subcultures.

The development of digital platforms brings about a rapid wave of commercialization, which is also profoundly affecting the symbiotic relationship between subcultures and music. On the one hand, the intervention of commercial capital provides more exposure opportunities and economic support for subculture music, and the commercial power even puts subculture on the stage and collides with mainstream culture. Brand cooperation, traffic realization and other ways help subculture break through the boundaries of niche and move from underground to mainstream market. On the other hand, over-commercialization may lead to the loss of the spiritual connotation of the subculture. When subculture music is simplified into "symbolic commodity" or "flow toward commodity" in the process of commercialization, its unique criticality and irony are easy to be dispelled. Under such a trend, the music genre, which is the carrier of the core ideas of subculture, will be reduced to the "fast-moving consumer goods" of cultural consumption.

Therefore, the symbiotic relationship between subculture and music genre is always a dynamic development process. Digital technology expands the creativity and communication power of subculture, while commercialization provides development opportunities that can even compete with mainstream culture, but also brings the challenge of identity loss. In the future, if subcultures and music genres want to remain active, they will need to find a balance between the benefits brought by digital technology and their own cultural connotations. How to balance the impact of digital technology and commercialization without losing the courage to innovate and the core of rebellion has become an important issue for the future development of subculture. This process is not only related to the survival of subculture itself, but also provides an important inspiration for the diversity of global cultural ecology.

# References

[1] Waugh, M. (2023). *'Music that actually matters'? Post-internet musicians, retromania and authenticity in online popular musical milieux.* [Doctoral dissertation], Anglia Ruskin Research Online (ARRO).

[2] Stafford, S. A. (2010). Music in the digital age: The emergence of digital music and its repercussions on the music industry. *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, *1*(2), 112-120.

[3] Manuel, P. (1995). Music as symbol, music as simulacrum: postmodern, pre-modern, and modern aesthetics in subcultural popular musics. *Popular music*, *14*(2), 227-239.

[4] Alfrey, L. M. (2010). *The search for authenticity: How hipsters transformed from a local subculture to a global consumption collective.* [Doctoral dissertation, Georgetown University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

[5] Ulusoy, E. (2016). Subcultural escapades via music consumption: Identity transformations and extraordinary experiences in Dionysian music subcultures. *Journal of Business Research*, *69*(1), 244-254.

[6] Volgsten, U. (2014). Music, culture, politics—communicating identity, authenticity and quality in the 21st century. *Nordisk kulturpolitisk tidsskrift*, *17*(1), 114-131.

[7] Miernik, M. A. (2013). *The Evolution of Emo and its Theoretical implications.* [Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee]. UWM Digital Commons.

[8] De la Rosa, K. (2022). *Subcultures of Music Listening: Motivations and Underlying Messages in Music Genres.* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Arizona].

[9] Moore, R. (2005). Alternative to what? Subcultural capital and the commercialization of a music scene. *Deviant behavior*, *26*(3), 229-252.