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YOUTH SUBCULTURES IN THE 2ND DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

Although the term “subculture” has been used for many years by the sociological nomenclature, its definition and re-definition continues to pose more and more problems to the researchers. These issues can be attributed to the changing nature of the group membership indicators that undergo constant evolution alongside the interests of the members themselves. As emphasized by Mirosław Pęczak (1992), the author of *Mały słownik subkultur młodzieżowych* (*Little Dictionary of Youth Subcultures*), at first, subculture was associated with a specific cultural poverty, pathologies and lack of social adaptation. Gradually, however, the pejorative connotation lost its grip; according to the definition from the above quoted dictionary, published in the 1990s, subculture is a “relatively coherent social group operating on the margins of the social tendencies considered as dominant in a given system and expressing its distinctiveness through negating or undermining the deeply rooted and commonly accepted cultural patterns” (Pęczak, 1992, p. 42).

The above definition is also eagerly quoted in more recent publications of the researchers dealing with the term “subculture” (for instance by J. Kwapiszewski or M. Śmiałek) who put particular emphasis on the subculture members’ rebellious attitude towards the commonly accepted cultural patterns. Krzysztof Złotucha (2012) claims that subculture is “a group of people disapproving of the traditional values.” In the light of the dynamic character of the social movements and the stances and attitudes related to them, these definitions have become somewhat obsolete. In the

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second decade of the 21st century terms such as “cultural patterns” referred to by Mirosław Pęczak or “the tradition,” emphasized by Złotucha may seem quite enigmatic. The changes in the mentality of the artistic circles are the best evidence that this is indeed the case. More than a decade (or several decades) ago, an attempt to overcome the etiquette associated with an anachronism could have been considered a counterculture. Today, however, it often becomes synonymous with the culture in the strict sense of the word. Likewise, the term “traditional values” is vague since no point of reference has been determined in the definition. Therefore, it is difficult to judge whether Złotucha was referring to the division of roles in the family, an individual political viewpoint or an attitude towards faith.

The present article aims to analyze the status of the subculture at the end of the second decade of the 21st century as well as to point to the distinctive features of subculture membership based on the communities under analysis. The authors have assumed the following definition of the term “subculture” to be binding in the course of the investigations: a relatively stable group of people with identical or similar interests, using common, internally coherent cultural code (such as language, the system of values, clothes) distinguishing them from other groups. The said cultural code is described as a set of features of a subculture. The categorization put forward by Przemysław Piotrowski (2003) seems optimal in this respect. The researcher enumerates the following categories as an integral part of the term: ideological beliefs, customs, the image, creativity.

Not only does the subculture membership generate the attitudes towards reality, the mode of conduct and dress code but it also helps many young people in defining their own identity. Integration with the other members of the group is equally essential since it leads to making friendships. A catalog of contemporary subcultures remains open: for the purposes of the present article, several groups have been identified having in mind such factors as the popularity among young people or the readiness to share the information concerning a given subculture. Thus, our analyses will focus on: members of the fitness or gym culture, metalheads (including the folk metalheads), fan communities, movements of historical reconstruction, hip-hop fans, motorization fans, football fans, online players and RPG players and skinheads/nationalists.

The „**fitness culture**” is not only typical for the youth: no rebellion elements nor attempts to stand out from the crowd mark its members. One can continue to adhere to it having passed the age of adolescence. Moreover, if practiced from an early age on, it typically remains with you for the years to come. The trend of “being fit,” slim and healthy, popularized by the celebrities, continues to be on top and drives the social media, in particular, Facebook and Instagram.

The second group selected for the analysis are **metalheads and folk metalheads**. The latter – as a relatively new group – are typically omitted by the subculture specialists who concentrate mainly on the metalheads, recognized as early in the 1980s in Poland (Łysek, 2010); taking into consideration the fact that the folk genre has

indeed evolved from the heavy metal genre, it seems only reasonable. Members of these groups are usually long-haired, wear black clothes and Doc Martens. They often have their bags and backpacks embroidered with pins and logos of their favorite bands. Behavior patterns during concerts are also characteristic: both metalheads and folk metalheads typically bang their hands to the rhythm of music. However, there are many elements distinctive only of folk metalheads such as specific jewelry, styled in a medieval fashion.

The third subculture being the object of the present article are **fan groups or communities**. Members of such groups are usually fans of a given artist, musical band, a film, a book or a fictional character. Fan communities are defined as a participating subculture, meaning that they not only imitate the way consumerist subcultures do but they also actively participate in shaping and creating the image of the group. Its activity consists in organizing gatherings whose programs include new arrangements of works of a particular artist, devising special actions to be performed during concerts or new mottos used as a hallmark for the members (Jenkins et al., 2009; Muszyński, 2008; Siuda, 2008).

The next subculture is **the historical reconstruction movement**. Defining the term “historical reconstruction” has caused numerous difficulties due to its broad scope. The current article refers to the definition offered by Bogacki, according to whom, “the historical reconstruction consists in activities that aim at depicting and visualizing various aspects of life of humankind in the past [...] and is performed by the persons dressed in costumes and applying objects [...] in an epoch-styled fashion, involved in deliberate performing and reconstructing a given historical period” (Bogacki, 2010, p. 16). Members gather regularly at historical festivals and manage discussion forums on social media. They often wear specific jewelry inspired by the historical Slavic, Scandinavian or Celtic culture. Additionally, they listen to a specific kind of music, most often historically styled, sometimes folk or folk metal. A considerable part of them openly declare their attachment to their homeland, a fact which manifests itself in the literature they choose (e.g. historical analyses).

The fifth group analyzed are **hip-hop fans**, the youth distinguished through the genre of music they listen to, the clothing, the involvement in extreme sports (skateboarding, rollerblading, cycling), dance (breakdance), gatherings on benches in the parks or in skate parks. They are mostly interested in rap music. They frequently imitate their beloved artists insofar as they create their own “verses” and beats. They are well familiar with the authors’ biographies, interpret their texts, consider of the lyrics as their credo, sometimes tattoo them on their bodies or get involved in graffiti painting. To the hip-hop dress code may include: loose pants, hooded blouses, peaked caps. Hip-hop fans prefer brands associated with their artists’ studios. Their everyday lives revolve around skate parks, playfields or park benches. This is the reason why the whole hip-hop culture tells the story of a life spent around blocks of flats or residential districts (Wrzesień, 2005).

A type of subculture very rarely referred in the literature are **motorization fans**.

Hence, the below description is based mainly on the experience and observations of one of the students involved to the project. Persons declaring themselves to be motorization fans are knowledgeable, both theoretically and practically, as far as car mechanics is concerned. They fix and repair their own, their families' or acquaintances' vehicles. Moreover, they get involved on various automotive forums on the Internet.

Equally noteworthy are be-scarfed fans who are mostly young people, with no specific level of education, bound by the affection towards football and the respective **football teams**. What constitutes a distinctive feature is for example the language used by the members. It often contains neologisms, either completely new words or the old ones used in the new context. **Football fans** are able to sacrifice a lot for the sake of their beloved club, which often involves aggressive behavior (Zakrzewski, 2013).

Skinheads, in turn, are characterized by a specific appearance: shaved heads and a large number of tattoos as well as extremely rightist or nationalist views often expressed manifestly and considered controversial. The society associates this subculture with the largest neo-Nazi organization in the world "Blood & Honor" (Morti, 2007) as well as with expressions of extreme racism and xenophobic behavior through the skinheads themselves often provide other values as binding for them. The interviews with 5 representatives of this subculture conducted in 2012 (Sosnowski, Tankielun, 2012) have shown that they are partial believers, part-time workers and planning to settle down or already having their families. The values listed as most important include friendship, loyalty, trust, also considered as essential by every human not being the member of this particular community. Other research materials have resulted in similar results (Lutostański, 2012). It turns out that the primary values for skinheads are loyalty, friendship, pride, tough-mindedness, and uncompromising attitude. The persons interviewed have not shown any particular interest in the politics, claiming that they always "strive to achieve lesser evil" as far as the elections are concerned (Lutostański, 2012). The subculture itself probably emerged at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century on the territory of Great Britain; it gained popularity in Poland during the 1980s when the subculture of punks emerged (Morti, 2007).

The last subculture discussed are **players**. A player is a person who spends the majority of his/her time playing computer or console games. There are various player communities worldwide. A large part of them engages in the Internet forums or virtual communities whose members communicate with each other, discuss the outcomes and progress made, share their experience and exchange counsels. Each player has his/her own nickname, the majority belongs to a clan or a guild which competes against other clans or guilds. Many players watch their idols' contests online.

METHODOLOGY

The sampling and research procedure. The research group (N= 23) consisted of persons aged 18-23 declaring themselves as members of a given subculture.

Researchers were tried to reach the representatives of every analyzed subculture. The students of the Scientific Circle of Psychology of the Humanitas University in Sosnowiec invited the representatives of youth subcultures to take part in structured individual interviews. The interviews were either face to face or conducted via the Internet by the same students. The major part of the interviews has been recorded on digital devices and transcribed. Qualitative methods were used to analyze.

The scope and analysis of the collected material. The material collected has been grouped into categories. The grounds for categorization underwent a critical analysis of a competent judge. The following stage consisted in distinguishing the sub-categories which underwent detailed qualitative analyses as well. In the course of the analysis, the below questions were asked:

1. Does subculture membership exist among contemporary youth?
2. What are the reasons behind identifying oneself with a particular subculture?
3. If the subculture membership does exist, what kind of behavior patterns characterize the members?
4. Are the values believed in by the respondents the same, similar or different to the ones considered by them to be crucial for their subcultures?

RESULTS

Description of the respondents. Altogether 23 persons aged 18-22 took part in the research, including 5 women and 18 men. The shortest period of membership was 1 year, the longest: 13 years, the average: 7.5 years. The declared subculture membership looks as follows:

- 5 metalheads (including 2 folk metalheads);
- 8 players (including 1 declaring himself as RPG player);
- 2 members of historical reconstruction movement;
- 3 motorization fans;
- 2 hip hop fans;
- 1 representative of a fan community;
- 1 fitness/gym culture representative;
- 1 skinhead.

1. Does subculture membership exist among contemporary youth?

On the basis of the qualitative analyses conducted, one may state that subculture membership continues to thrive today among the youth. Examples include metalheads, skinheads and hip-hop fans.

Moreover, the classification of certain groups to particular subcultures arouses doubts both among the researchers and among the respondents themselves. The above concerns most of all the followers of the reconstruction movement or the players (online and RPG players). The representatives of those groups express their doubts as to the grounds for categorizing their environment as a “subculture:” “It is not a “subculture” but rather an internally diversified environment of hobbyists (01Reconstructors);” “The fact that I play RPG does not make me a member of a subculture (08Gamer).”

Another category of “subculture” members are persons who might undergo a process of entering a behavioral addiction. This includes players and fitness/gym culture followers who perform certain acts aiming at reducing the tension and concentrate on obtaining pleasure out of a given activity (playing, exercising) (Lelonek-Kuleta, 2014). It is sometimes the case that representatives of those “subcultures” are aware of the problem: “ Instead of spending my free time productively, for example on learning, reading a book, I tend to turn on the computer, start playing [...]. That seems to be a problem (06Gamer).”

2. What are the reasons behind identifying oneself with a particular subculture?

The reasons behind entering a given subculture are most often related to music, which is characteristic for this particular subculture: “I was looking over some films on the Internet and there was a metal band playing in the background and so I got into it” (04Metal). Another motivation is friends and acquaintances already considering themselves as members of a given subculture or modeling certain behavior patterns: “I was just visiting a colleague of mine and looking at him playing [the games] (03Gamer); „someone has turned on a folk song, I liked it and I began to dig deeper” (03Folk metalhead). It sometimes happens that family members shape the behavior patterns characteristic for a given subculture or group: “my dad played CS [the authors’ note: Counter Strike] and one day he went out for a shopping so I replaced him for a while and it so happened that I got involved” (01Gamer); „my grandpa was running a car resale, he had those cars [...], I started to get interested [...] my dad was also a car mechanic – it was thanks to my grandpa and my dad” (02Moto). Joining the skinhead subculture looks differently. The term employed here is “being enrolled:” “the guys picked me on the Internet and reckoned that I bode well for the group, meaning that I can somehow contribute [...]. I was not looking for this kind of cooperation but since they offered it, I decided to give it a try” (01Skinhead).

In the case of the players, the motivation is sometimes looking for ways of dealing with tension or stress: „a way of winding down and chilling out” (02Gamer); „The need to merge the fiction with the real world. You just didn’t feel like abandoning

this fictitious better world for the sake of the reality. You feel like you could immerse yourself entirely” (04Gamer). An escape from the problems was a direct reason for joining the subculture in only one of the interviews: „an escape from the problem. In my situation back then, I was completely detached from my friends and needed a place on Earth where I could find myself alone; I joined the gym out of boredom and there I remained for good” (01Fitness/gym culture).

3. If the subculture membership does exist, what kind of behavior patterns characterize their members?

What seems to characterize the majority of subcultures is the specific appearance of their members: “one may notice that students of both sexes carry Thor’s hammers, Slavic axes on their necks or some thematic shirts” (03Reconstruction); „Doc Martens – of smaller or bigger size, usually fitted with metal, heaps and loads of leather or jeans jackets and chains, recently white high tops. A number of badges of bands one listens to is often sewn onto a particular part of clothing [...]” (04Metal); „[...] shaved bald [...], wearing Doc Martens, cargo pants and blouses with nationalist inscriptions etc.” (01Skinhead). However, for certain subcultures appearance does not matter so much: „I don’t think that there is such thing [an appearance]. An idea once occurred that we wear a reggae and Rastafari strap but the idea was soon abandoned” (01Fan). What sometimes matters are certain symbols: “We have various initials, digits that symbolize something, for instance, dates of events. We also apply graphic symbols used at the beginning of 20th century by the Polish nationalists” (01Skinhead); „symbols, pagan, Celtic and Scandinavian signs” (01Folkmetal); „a logo of a brand, some gadgets with logos or an inscription” (01Moto).

Another characteristic trait is a common language: “we do communicate in a slang, we use terms associated with an automotive branch which might not be understandable [for others]” (02Moto); „for example superjock, gorilla or the greeting itself „yo superjock, yo gorilla. How’s it going? Mass or reduction and so on “are phrases that do characterize us a bit” (01Fitness/gym culture).

For the subcultures based on a particular musical genre like metalheads or hip-hop fans, the music is of utmost importance: “The type of music you listen to is one of your biggest assets” (01Folk metalhead).

What is also characteristic is the participation in various gatherings, festivals and events: “gatherings of automotive freaks are organized frequently, people arrive in their own specific vehicles, like the ones from the socialist period, they exchange experiences, drive through the city in parades” (01Moto); „Of more important cyclic events one should mention the 11th November independence march in Warsaw” (01Skinhead); „Events like Slavic Folk Metal Night in Brenna are organized as parts of larger events or concerts” (03Folkmetal); „hip-hop concerts, hip hop festivals – in the Czech Republic, many different events [...]” (01HH).

Making acquaintances with members of subcultures. One cannot claim that representatives of youth subcultures are only friends with other members of those sub-

cultures. Some of them limit themselves to the very subculture they are part of: “most of my friends identify themselves with this culture” (02Metalhead), others, however, have made friends through joining a particular group: “I have got to know people during various online contests” (04Gamer).

4. Are the values believed in by the respondents the same, similar or different to the ones considered by them to be crucial for their subcultures?

The qualitative analyses have shown that the values believed in by the interviewed persons often correspond, to a certain extent, to the values of groups of which they are members. To such values, one may include family, friends, trust or honesty, e.g. “happiness, family, friends” (01Gamer). The values declared by the groups of the respondents are somehow more general, e.g. courage, “apoliticality” (02Gamer). In some cases, the values mentioned by the respondents correspond ideally to the values declared by the group, e.g. “tradition, fidelity, mutual support, attachment to one’s own origin” (01Skinhead). In most cases the values just match to a certain extent: “Obviously respect, trust are crucial [...]; but in general it trusts for sure [...]” (02HH). There were also cases where the values declared by the individual differed from those declared by the group: „[...] internal, mental and psychic tranquility and ease [...], the sense of community and being of help to others [...]; [...] good music [...]” (04Metalhead).

SUMMARY

Accessing the target group was a task of considerable difficulty. Those who conducted the interviews, as well as those who encouraged the others to participate in the research, were students of Psychology – not much older than the respondents. Despite that, some solicited individuals reacted in a hasty manner insofar as they undermined the legitimacy of calling themselves members of “subcultures.” One of the groups designated “Instagram influencers/fashion bloggers” for the purposes of this article, encompassed the persons exerting an influence over and shaping the reality through the popular social media. Contrary to expectations, the persons invited refused to take part in the research.

Despite the above difficulties, it may be concluded, based on the qualitative analysis conducted, that certain subcultures may still be distinguished in the Polish culture, an example being the metalheads, the skinheads or the hip-hop fans. At the same time, completely new subcultures emerge, such as the reconstruction activists whose classification raises controversies. Having analyzed the respondents’ answers and having referred to a scarce literature on the subject (e.g. Szulc, 2014), the authors would deem it reasonable to consider them as persons with common interests, rather than members of a subculture. On the other hand, however, one could comply with Piotrowki’s (2003) line of argumentation and assume that a subculture is

a group sharing ideology, habits, the image, and artistic creativity. If this were the case, these new groups could be considered as subcultures. Without a doubt, the issue requires further research. The other groups that escape easy definition are members of the fitness/gym culture and players, whose activity is focused on reducing the tension. These groups do not share common ideology nor do they create any image. The reasons for joining the subcultures vary, one of them being the sense of belonging, which is rarely mentioned directly although it surely constitutes an important aspect of growing up. Being a member of a subculture requires a specific appearance (attire, symbols), listening to a particular musical genre, taking part in festivals, concerts and various types of events. Based on the interviews conducted, the authors cannot determine whether the values declared as important by the analyzed subcultures are the same or different to those declared by the individuals. However, bearing in mind the developmental character of the subcultures in the 21st century, the subject constitutes an interesting material for further research.

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Keywords: youth subcultures

Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyse subculture among youth in the second decade of the 21st century and to characterize determinants of subculture affiliation by research group examples. The theoretical part is based on the definition of subculture which was approved by the researchers including short descriptions of the research groups. In a later section authors, based on interviews which were conducted with representatives of particular subcultures, characterize the behaviour, appearance and feelings connected with subculture affiliation in an extensive way. The article also outlines the reasons why young people decide to join those subcultures and their value system within a specific sub culture, as perceived by each individual.



W KRĘGU SUBKULTUR MŁODZIEŻOWYCH DRUGIEJ DEKADY XXI WIEKU

Słowa kluczowe: subkultury młodzieżowe

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie statusu subkultury wśród młodzieży drugiej dekady XXI wieku oraz scharakteryzowanie wyznaczników przynależności do niej na przykładzie badanych społeczności. Część teoretyczna traktuje o przyjętej przez badaczy definicji subkultury oraz krótkie charakterystyki badanych społeczności. W dalszej części autorzy pracy, na podstawie wywiadów przeprowadzonych z przedstawicielami konkretnych subkultur, w obszerny sposób charakteryzują zachowanie, wygląd i odczucia związane z przynależnością subkulturową. Artykuł przedstawia także przyczyny, dla których młodzi ludzie decydują się dołączyć do danej społeczności oraz indywidualnie postrzegany system wartości w obrębie konkretnych subkultur.



