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## **Countercultures of consumption: teenage heavy metal affiliates' coping responses to deviant labeling**

**Abdelmajid AMINE, IRG – Université Paris-Est ([amine@u-pec.fr](mailto:amine@u-pec.fr))**

**Anis JOUNAID, IRG – Université Paris-Est ([jounaidanis@gmail.com](mailto:jounaidanis@gmail.com))**

### **Abstract:**

Consumption activities are governed by social norms that mark a division between accepted and rejected behaviors. The latter grow in importance when they are shared by many individuals as a part of affinity-based consumer gatherings. It is particularly the case of the heavy metal counterculture, which arouses explicit rejection by several institutional and social actors, and which takes the form of negative social labeling that can affect all heavy metal affiliates including teenagers, at school or in their homes. Following an ethnographic research design, we conducted a qualitative study upon which we drew up a typology of heavy metal labeling along with a taxonomy of the teenagers' coping responses according to their respective interaction contexts.

**Keywords:** *Counterculture, Deviance, Labeling, Coping, Teenagers, Heavy Metal.*

**Track:** *Consumer behaviour.*

## 1. Literature Review

Consumer behavior literature is replete with studies on consumer gatherings. They have been conceptualized either as subcultures of consumption, with a defined ethos, values and a hierarchical structure (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) or as countercultures aiming to resist hegemony and, *in fine*, undermine the established social order (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). The latter and the former gatherings being differentiated by their relationship to the mainstream which is tied around consumption practices adopted by the community members. While subcultures may be marked by behaviors that deviate from the marketed consumption norms (Amine & Gicquel, 2011), countercultures overtly demean the mainstream as resistance to established social norms and as a central identity-driven element inscribed in their ethos (Hebdige, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).

Opposition to market hegemony can take several forms. Some countercultural movements are inscribed in political activism and aim to denunciate capitalism's misdemeanors (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004); others try to escape the market on a punctual basis, more or less (Kozinets, 2002). We focus on style based counter-cultures, that oppose and subvert dominant cultural forms and norms, thereby creating a cultural countervailing power (Hebdige, 2002). Style represents the spectacular aspect of counter-cultures. It is composed of infrastructural (slang, codes and rituals) and plastic elements (music and sartorial aspect) (Cléret & Rémy, 2010) that serve as a means of expression, identification (between affiliates) and distinction (from the rest of the cultural spectrum). Style is central to the study of countercultures, being a symbol of overt resistance to cultural hegemony that can also be used for normalization and recuperation purposes by a number of mercantile actors (Hall & Jefferson, 2006). Style serves as a material manifestation of the aesthetics of the counterculture (Snell & Hodgetts, 2007), which, deviates from dominant social and cultural norms, and which, before being normalized, might stir up a negative labeling of affiliates (Henry & Caldwell, 2006) as explained in the next section.

### 1.1 Deviant labeling

Labeling theory developed by Becker (1966) enables us to inscribe deviance in its socio-cultural context, providing a better understanding of the concept. Becker (1966) posits that norms are constructs put in place by dominant social groups capable of establishing a social order favorable to their interests (Link & Phelan, 2001), and fostering "normal" behaviors while stemming "deviant" ones. The consequences and significations of a given behavior will vary, depending on the attitude of the social context towards the enacted behavior (Amine & Gicquel, 2011). In cases where the behavior is considered deviant, the individual will be labeled at the very least (Becker, 1966), or sanctioned at the most. Becker's relativist conceptualization of deviance is based on a typology of deviant acts, in which he distinguishes covert and overt deviancy. We focus on the latter as the heavy metal (HM) counterculture uses a proper style to materialize its ethos (Snell & Hodgetts, 2007).

Lyrical themes (suicide, Satanism, occultism, anti-social attitudes), musical characteristics (tonality, aggressiveness, minors keys) and moral panics associated to HM reflect a strong deviant image of this counterculture (Arnett, 1991; Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, & LeVine, 2011). Thus defined, HM contrasts with conventional cultural products (POP, R&B) at both content and appearance levels (Sinclair & Dolan, 2015), making it a target for moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1966) like schools and religious movements.

### 1.2 Responses to labeling: Coping strategies

Lazarus (1966) and Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) provide for the analysis of stressful interpersonal interaction situations in the light of coping theory. Coping theory allows the

identification and understanding of mechanisms mobilized by individuals when facing tension context that may alter their self-esteem, such as when they are subjected to social labeling or stigmatization. Building on that, we take interest in coping strategies exerted by Teenage Heavy Metal Affiliates (THMA) to manage the discrepancy and the tension between the identities they claim and the deviant ones imposed by society. Our main goal is to draw up a taxonomy of these strategies and develop an understanding of the social context on their enactment.

Therefore, our main research question can be formulated as follows: How do teenage heavy metal affiliates deal with their deviant labeling? Which can be declined into the following sub-questions: What are the types of labeling targeting those teenagers? To what coping strategies do they resort to manage this labeling depending on the interaction context? And how does this unfold through their stylistic and aesthetic consumption practices?

## 2. Methodology

Studies investigating HM's culture of consumption focus on adult affiliates (Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Snell & Hodgetts, 2007) who exhibit their style in carnival contexts such as festivals (Chaney & Goulding, 2016). Our exploratory study investigates, within the French context, the countercultural affiliation's influence on teenagers' representations of social reality as well as their socialization to consumption, being in an identity construction phase (John, 2000). While carnivals allow, nay impose, countercultural conformity displayed aesthetically, we deem more appropriate to consider day to day interactions between THMA and outsiders (people who have stopped or have never been HM affiliates) to study negative HM labeling management strategies.

Our main goal being to develop an understanding of HM labeling and affiliates' coping strategies, hence our choice of a qualitative perspective which allows us to grasp the sociocultural and symbolic dimensions of consumption, and inscribe consumption practices in their respective social contexts. Following an ethnographic research design (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Snell & Hodgetts, 2007), we resorted to face-to-face semi-structured interviews with informants<sup>1</sup> that recruited in two sites : a HM-related accessories and clothes shop and a bar where a weekly HM gathering takes place. Observations we have conducted on both sites have enabled us to grasp the role of the aesthetic dimension (sartorial HM aspect and HM-related accessories displayed by affiliates) in generating sartorial and Satanist (anti-religious) labeling, and in unfolding specific coping strategies (confrontation and concealment).

## 3. Findings

In the following, we present a typology of the social labeling faced by THMA, as well as the strategies they resort to in order to cope. We will then discuss how social contexts influence both enactment and management social labeling.

### 3.1 Labeling types

#### 3.1.1 Satan's work: a well-established anti-religious labeling

HM bands' use of Satanist-related symbols and references, as well as aggression acts towards religious institutions (Hjelm et al., 2011; Sinclair & Dolan, 2015), have strongly affected public opinions about HM, to the extent that it has become systematically linked to

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<sup>1</sup> 8 Teenagers as principal informants (15 to 20 years old) and 5 young adults as complementary informants (21 to 25 years old).

Satanism (Arnett, 1991). Our data show how inseparable HM and anti-religious connotations have become, as teachers in both French public secular schools and private catholic educational institutions refer to it:

[Romain] (17 years old): “They’ve [Teachers] always been like: what are you doing, it’s Satan and stuff.”

### *3.1.2 Background noise: THMA’s musical labeling*

Music is one of the main reasons why HM is viewed as deviant genre. Stylistic specificities like rapidity, aggressiveness and guitar distortions, to mention only a few, give the impression that HM is nothing but “noise,” as the following excerpt shows :

[Elodie] (16 years old): “Not everybody likes HM, and when we talk about it ... people often think of clichés, guitar saturations, only screams...”

According to Elodie, these stereotypes contribute to HM’s public unpopularity. Paradoxically, this musical transgression is at the core of HM’s values, reaffirming its countercultural character for affiliates. Music labeling, then, would help delineate the boundaries of the HM counter-culture, as long as the THMA are aware of the stereotype linked to their musical genre and can thus distinguish the insiders from the outsiders (people who are not, or are no longer followers of HM).

### *3.1.3 THMA’s sartorial labeling*

The HM-related sartorial aspect is also one of the elements that inscribe this counterculture in deviance, generating social labeling targeting affiliates who display HM’s deviant aesthetics. Outsiders’ remarks range from harmless jokes to more violent statements:

[Sophie] (24 years old): “Oh nice outfit (...) Aren’t you ashamed of dressing like that.”

The hostility towards HM’s aesthetics is due to the extravagance of clothes and accessories displayed by THMA who proceed to a stylization of culturally deviant forms (Snell & Hodgetts, 2007) through a combination of dark colors and anti-social symbols (skulls for example) that contrast with mainstream accepted aesthetics.

## *3.2 Conflict-based coping strategies*

### *3.2.1 Confrontation as a form of resistance to stereotypes*

The confrontation of the THMA with labelers involves both argumentation and an asserted display of the HM style (musical and clothing). This strategy is mostly mobilized in contexts of informal and non-institutional interactions (family home and interactions with peers). In the first case, followers try to deconstruct and reject stereotypes linked to HM (Henry & Caldwell, 2006), which signal ignorance and a lack of knowledge of the HM culture on the part of these outsiders. The THMA declared "defending" their style, and by extension "defending themselves," against these remarks and these prejudices, such as follows:

[Interviewer]: Okay, have you ever entered debates with people who denigrate heavy metal?

[Romain] (17 years old): “Yeah, not bad yeah, I try to defend as much as possible”.

Moreover, the consumption of cultural material resulting from HM is imbued with a very significant symbolic dimension (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The HM clothing display is a means of rejecting and resisting mainstream aesthetic standards (Snell & Hodgetts, 2007). The THMA declare displaying their style on a daily basis despite being labeled and targeted in school as well as at home, as reported by Martin (17 years old):

[Interviewer]: “And suddenly, you’re like that all the time, all the time, at school, out of school”

[Martin]: “Very regularly, yeah... every time I go to concerts I buy T-shirts..., then I love to always have a [musical] group T-shirt or a small patch, etc.”

### 3.2.2 *Denigration as a strategy to discredit outsiders*

Since the term “denigration” has a broad spectrum of meanings, we mean any HM affiliates’ discourse aiming to underline the ignorance of the labelers, ridicule their remarks or distance themselves from them, especially when interacting with peers of the same age. Indeed, one of the strong trends that emerge from the analysis of the interviews carried out is the fact that THMA do not fail to point out the “inculture” of those who designate them as deviant, such as Elodie (16 years old) who discredits the remarks and acquaintances of these friends concerning metal:

[Elodie]: “I think there are ... That there are not many people who will really try to understand the lyrics in metal, especially when they do not know”.

## 3.3 *Avoidance coping strategies*

### 3.3.1 *Dodging as a strategy for diffusing tensions*

THMA state that in certain circumstances, they avoid confrontation so as not to have problems or worries. This contrasts with the confrontation strategy to the extent that the anticipation of negative consequences means that the related risks are judged more important as the normative power of school institutions and parental authority reduce the possibilities of resorting to conflict-based strategies. In some cases, Cécile (18 years old) avoids standing up to her parents because she feels it is not worth it. In other words, she does not consider it relevant to enter into a conflict with her parents because HM. Her evaluation of the interaction situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) then plays into Cecile's dodging decision. Indeed, she does not fully appropriate the HM style and considers resistance to labeling not that important to cause her to be reprimanded:

[Cécile]: “I was not trying, finally I did not enter into open conflict with them (her parents) for music...”

### 3.3.2 *Concealing the HM style as a compromise strategy*

The term “compromise” refers to an arbitration that THMA make between overt affiliation to HM and the specific constraints of certain social contexts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If THMA cannot display their style either because they are forced or for personal reasons, they do not give up their affiliation so far. Similarly, our data show that affiliation to HM does not always imply a permanent display of the style in question.

Institutional pressure is one of the main reasons why THMA are led to adopt this strategy of concealment, the most common example being the internal rules in schools, especially private and/or religious high schools, where rules related to clothing are tighter than those in force in public secular schools, as reported by Marc (15 years old): “Torn jeans, I do not have the right, otherwise there are the stuff...uh ... No, after the rest is OK ... well, they do not like it too much, but it's not forbidden...”

## 4. Discussion and Research Avenue

Because of the deviant image related to HM (Arnett, 1991, Hjelm et al., 2011), its followers are the target of several types of labeling; in this case, anti-religious, musical and clothing-related. Labeling is not unique but multiple. This distinction between different types of labeling makes it possible from the outset to relativize the deviant perception of HM, which rules out the possibility of a frozen abnormal image since labels do not relate to the same



“deviant” HM. It also allows us to contextualize THMA’s social labeling as wearing symbols related to death and exhibiting a typical clothing aspect of HM do not have the same meaning depending on whether takes place in a public high school, where the outsider reactions will be limited to mere remarks, or within a private catholic institution in where THMA are subject to greater normative pressure and stricter sanctions. Indeed, institutional constraints and the pressure exerted by other social actors are all elements that can influence, even structure, the relationship of insiders with deviant HM aesthetics, causing them to use tricks and subterfuges to hide or circumvent the codes and standards imposed to manage the labeling that targets them.

In addition, we are broadening the spectrum of coping strategies deployed by HM affiliates in response to labeling and stigma. In light of the study by Henry & Cladwell (2006) who had previously explored strategies of confrontation and concealment, we uncover two additional coping strategies: one based on conflict, namely denigration, and another based on avoidance, namely dodging. We postulate that the four coping strategies called upon and implemented by our respondents (confrontation, concealment, denigration and dodging) are not fixed or exclusive, but rather tend to evolve depending on the particularities of the interaction between THMA and their social environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Our results constitute a good example of this as our respondents did not generally resort to only one coping strategy in order to deal with labeling. Moreover, these strategies can influence each other (denigrating an outsider may rule out the possibility of confrontation for example) and strongly depend on the anticipation of the consequences of the institutional pressure (unequal distribution of power between secular and religious schools), the degree of involvement in the HM counterculture and THMA’s perceived risks related to the situation of interaction.

By comparing types of labeling and coping strategies studied earlier, it is possible to build a social designation management model that targets AAHM:

- THMA resort more often to avoidance strategies (i.e. dodging) in response to the Satanist labeling as they consider that the latter as a sign of labelers’ ignorance, which they can also denigrate without having to confront them.

- Music labeling often leads to a confrontation strategy as a means to deal with outsiders, involving argumentation. This is probably due to the fact that this type of labeling targets, if not threatens, the core of the HM counterculture (i.e. musical production), and denotes, at best, an interest about HM which affiliates deem worthy of a response.

- Clothing labeling, which concerns the most visible dimension of HM followers, is common to all THMA interactions (in school, at home or with peers). It allows describing the different coping strategies identified above, ranging from avoidance in a context of unequal and highly constrained interactions (school) to those based on conflict, applied in a more egalitarian social context (peers).

Finally, THMA labeling and the coping strategies identified highlight dimensions of distinction, opposition, and resistance with respect to the consumption of HM (Hall & Jefferson, 2006, Hebdige, 2002, Hjelm et al. 2011). The interactions of THMA with outsiders illustrate the separation made between mainstream and the counterculture, and emphasize the central role played by consumption, including through strategies involving revealing and concealing one’s affiliation. This separation is present in commercial variations clothes brand H&M product offerings, which are seen by THMA as an attempt to recover and democratize counter-cultural consumption (Hall & Jefferson, 2006) especially as they are the work of market actors offering more conventional HM-related products. Our study provides information on the need to appreciate the symbolic dimension of counter-cultural consumption in the construction of commercial offers for THMA and, in particular, elements that create a separation and distinction with respect to the rest of the cultural spectrum. This

could be achieved by playing with the atmosphere present at the sales point, which should be reflective of the HM aesthetic, and resorting to commercial variations that would not be limited to best-known HM references.

Beyond the aesthetic affiliation, HM counter-cultural consumption may indicate identity issues on the part of THMA, as is the case with other countercultural consumption practices such as anti-consumerist movements (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Our research thus gives rise to a reflection on the relationship between the role of affiliation to aesthetic countercultures and the identity paths of young consumers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Typically, how does belonging to countercultural deviant aesthetic tendencies influence the identity trajectories of consumers during the adolescent period? Does this affiliation structure the registration of followers in a (quasi) permanent way to the counterculture, or is it restricted to the transitional period of adolescence? Finally, in addition to the social context, do individual characteristics have a greater influence on the application of strategies by adult affiliates whose personalities are more structured, compared to an audience of teenagers in the midst of identity construction and undergoing a stronger influence from the social context?

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