Music Festivals in the 21st Century: Self-Constructed Cool through Social Media and Commodity Purchases

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Introduction

"Before we get into lecture, we're going to play a little ice-breaker game! Get into groups of three –try to get with people you don't already know –and introduce yourselves. Tell your group your name, year, major, and talk about yourself. I'll give you, let's say, five minutes. Group up!"

Almost every college student has had this first-day-of-class drill. You are obligated to speak with people who you have never met and know nothing about. What do you talk about? With five semesters of ice-breakers under my belt, I have discovered that one topic is guaranteed to avoid (at least temporarily) awkward conversation: music. Unlike summer vacations or career aspirations or party habits, music is a universal topic. Regardless of his or her favorite genre, most people have something to say about music and their experience with it. One experience regarding music that many people share –and which I have discussed multiple times in ice-breakers –is attending a music festival.

Coachella. Warped Tour. Ultra. Bonnaroo. Electric Forest. Lollapalooza. Burning Man. Mention any one of these music festivals in conversation, and chances are the person you're speaking to has been to the festival, or knows someone who has gone. At any rate, they have probably heard of the festival before. Over the past few decades, music festivals have assimilated into American culture. In 2013, there were a total of 338 different music festivals in the United States.[1] Tickets for the first weekend of Coachella were completely sold out after only 15 minutes after they were available for purchase online. The entire two-weekend show was sold

[1] <http://www.musicfestivaljunkies.com/music-festivals-2013/>

out, with 90,000 people who bought three-day passes for each weekend. This one music festival alone grossed $47.3 million from ticket sales of 158,387.[2]

In today's world, music festivals are not just events at which people can listen to live music. They are often used as tools by attendees to construct an identity of cool. Individuals later prove their attendance through commodity purchases and social media, thus reinforcing the image of cool. The problem with this is that identifying oneself through commodity purchases takes away from a person's individuality. Additionally, the focus on proving festival attendance –rather than living in the moment –takes away from the musicking process and music's intended effect.

Literature Review

Some music festival attendees today are preoccupied with constructing an image of "cool" and focus much of their attention on documenting their experience at the festival by recording videos and taking photos, and posting them on social media sites. In her 2011 article, Professor Cheryl DuBose defines social media as "a collection of Internet-based applications that…allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."[3] To be considered "user-generated," content on social media must "(1) be published on a publicly accessible website or social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; (2) show a certain amount of creative effort; and (3) have been created outside of professional routines and practices." The

[2] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/coachella-sells-weekends-416619>
[3] DuBose, Cheryl. "The Social Media Revolution.": "Social media is a collection of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creationand exchenge of user-generated content." (pg. 112)

consumerist business world refers to social media as "consumer-generated media," and many businesses exploit social media sites to promote their brand "recruit new customers."[4]

As a result of music festival attendees attention to social media, these attendees pay less attention to the musical performance in front of them, thus taking away from what scholar Christopher Small calls "musicking."[5] This term, which denotes active listener participation, suggests that music is a bi-directional relationship. That is, music affects listeners, who in turn interpret the music. The message of music, Small also suggests, can only conveyed to the listener if he or she participate in musicking.[6] Therefore, if a music festival attendee is not aware of and involved in the performance, the relationship between music and the listener is void.

In 2011, Rutgers University scholars Jessa Lingel and Mor Naaman examined the motivations and effects of concert goers using social media –specifically YouTube –in live music settings. There definition of 'social media' was slightly different than DuBose's. They said social media was characterized by two significant characteristics: "(1) the posting of lasting content in public settings" and (2) "the visible and durable identity and recognized contribution by authors."[7] As a form of social media, therefore, YouTube allows serves a number of functions for contributors: as a personal archive; a platform to shape identity formation and signaling; a place to conduct social interaction with other YouTubers and viewers; and a place to share information with the general public (Lingel and Naaman 333).

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[4] DuBose, Cheryl. (pg. 113-114)

[5] Small, Christopher. "Music and Musicking": "To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performace (what is called composing), or by dancing." (pg. 9)

[6] Small, Christopher: "The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance…" (pg. 13)

[7] Lingel, Jessa and Naaman, Mor. "You should have been there, man: Live music, DIY content, and online communities." (2011.) *New Media and Society*.

With a shared understanding that social media and video recording interrupt the experience of live music, Rutgers University scholars Jessa Lingel and Mor Naaman conducted a study to find the reasons for this behavior. More specifically, they investigated the motivations and effects of YouTube-using concertgoers who record and later post videos of live music performances. To find participants, the researchers looked on YouTube for concert videos from three concerts – one large venue and two small venues –in New York during spring of 2010.[8] The study determined that recording videos "involves management of present experience with future gains, where a reduced enjoyment of the show is balanced by creating a lasting documentation of the event."[9] One participant explained:

> "I definitely feel much more detached when I'm recording versus when I'm not recording. It's kind of like a double-edged sword because…I can't wait to put this on YouTube for the rest of the world to see. But on the other side of that, I'm watching the show just through this screen. And sometimes you forget to break away and actually look at the stage or look around you."[10]

The study also found that videos –as opposed to still photos, for example –are more valuable because of "their ability to replicate a sense of attending the show. In some cases, these videos are treated as gifts within explicitly non-economic systems of exchange. Concert videos provide a point of contact between individual users, fan communities and (at least in some cases) bands" (Lingel and Naaman 340).

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[8] Lingel, Jessa and Naaman, Mor: "A Muse concert in Madison Square Garden (a large stadium in Manhattan), and a set of indie concerts at two small venues (Cake Chop in Manhattan's Lower East Side, and Maxwell's in Hoboken, New Jersey)." (pg. 336)

[9] Lingel, Jessa and Naaman, Mor. (pg. 344)

[10] Lingel, Jessa and Naaman, Mor. (pg. 340)

With these findings in mind, Lingel and Naaman were left to question how audience members who record videos during the concert negotiate in their own mind the benefits of a potential future gain –sharing the video on YouTube and being able to re-watch the performance online again and again –with the knowledge that recording the video will cause "a diminished immediate experience."[11] How does the experience of watching the online recording compare to watching live? Does the performance lose meaning? Further more, do audience members consider it 'worth it' to miss out on the live performance's meaning in order to prove through social media that they were even there?

Body

While the popularity of music festivals has rose significantly in the mainstream the past several years, the concept of music festivals is not new. Beginning as far back as the 16th century, European pleasure gardens served as forms of entertainment, providing an open space for people –initially most from the bourgeois class –to listen to live orchestra and socialize with one another. Although socializing was acceptable, the 'criteria' for these settings was to maintain a rather quiet disposition so not to disturb the music. In scenes like Douglas Park, though, youths were often looked down on for talking over the music, flirting with strangers, and dancing with each other. Such behavior was considered rebellious at the time, and was an attempt to illustrate their difference from the bourgeois.[12] Of course, people at the time did not have technology or

[11] Lingel, Jessa and Naaman, Mor: "One tension among these findings is the question of negotiating a diminished immediate experience and an enhanced future gain, where there is something of a tradeoff in the decision to diminish experiencing one's favorite song being played live precisely in order to have a record of attending (and 'reliving') a show later."
[12] Vaillant, Derek. "Battle for the Baton." (pg. 76)

social media that is available today to prove their attendance to others. Instead, their outspoken behavior was a way to make themselves known at these events.

Sociability, then and now, is a key factor that draws people to music festivals.[13] Festival directors understand that there are various reasons for attendance: to hang out with friends, listen to live music, socialize, etc. So in addition to the music line up, they include other activities "to further enhance the festival experience."[14] The 2012 Glade festival, for example, featured a roller disco. Other festival events have included fairground rides, pamper parlours, and water zorbing.

Amidst all of the musical performances and activities, music festivals can be intimidating to attend. Spectators, especially first-timers, may have difficulty knowing where to go first. One thing that is promoted right at the entrance, though, is merchandise. In a YouTube video created to help first-time festival goers, veteran Coachella attendee Christiana Salas explains that vendors are "always right at the entrance" of festival grounds.[15] The placement at the entrance of the grounds reinforces the importance of purchasing merchandise to people. As Small explains, the entryway to any event "is a place to see and be seen."[16]

As scholar Elizabeth Fourie explains, individuals in social settings tend to conform to the dominant principles of their peers to become part of the "in crowd."[17] Therefore, when a person enters a music festival and sees fellow concert attendees buying merchandise, he or she will likely buy an item (or items), too, in an effort to fit in and look cool. This process is further

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[13] O'Grady, Alice and Kill, Rebekka. "Exploring Festival Performance as a State of Encounter." (pg. 271)
[14] O'Grady, Alice and Kill, Rebekka: "The intellectual, artistic or emotional satisfaction that theatre can offer is no longer adequate for most people, they want more. People want to meet, communicate and experience something special together. So a festival these days should ideally not only be an artistic event, but also a social experience." Pg. 271-272.
[15] Salas, Christiana. "Coachella Survival Guide." Online video clip. *YouTube*. 10 April, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUJ3V0T3sSU>
[16] Small, Christopher. "Music and Musicking." (pg. 23)
[17] Fourie, Elizabeth: "Unification and the following of trends are perceived as 'normal'. In order to belong in the social world and be seen as part of the 'in crowd' (and this is the irony), as an 'individual' a person will conform to certain trends and 'buy into' certain identities portrayed by society as being 'cool' on which to base their own identities." (pg. 30)

explained by author Frank Thomas, whose "countercultural idea" suggests that consumerism is linked with conformity.[18] The purchasing cycle will continue as more people enter the festival and are swayed to buy commodities. Through the purchasing of material goods to construct identity, "individuals will…lose a part of their individuality."[19]

Another reason that individuals may purchase commodities at music festivals is because of interpersonal music marketing. In their article on the history of music marketing, scholars Ogden, Ogden, and Long define marketing as "the process of identifying needs and satisfying these needs with suitable goods or services, through product design, distribution, and promotion."[20] The idea of group belongingness is key to music marketing. Products are advertised as giving the consumer the opportunity to become closer to the musician on a personal level, and the ability to become part of the "in crowd" (peers who have also purchased the product).[21] For example, advertisements for Miley Cyrus' documentary *Miley Cyrus: The Movement* asked people to "join the movement." That is, to become part of the "in crowd" with Miley and her followers. This relates back to Fourie's argument that individuals will conform to become part of the "in crowd," and their conformity is demonstrated through commodities that he or she may not purchase if it weren't for the desire to fit in.

In his article "The Structure of Hip Consumerism," Joseph Heath argues other potential reasons that people "give in" to commodity purchases. He labels one the "ideology critique," which suggests that in the face of consumption, people simply do not think rationally.[22] According to this critique, a reason may be that music festival attendees are so overwhelmed by

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[18] Frank, Thomas. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Chicago: 1997. (pg. 14-15)
[19] Fourie, Elizabeth. "The Representation of Materialist Consumerism in Film." (pg. 30)
[20] Ogden, James; Ogden, Denise; and Long, Karl. "Music Marketing: A History and Landscape." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Service*. March 2011. (pg. 120)
[21] Ogden, James; Ogden, Denise; and Long, Karl. (pg. 124)
[22] Heath, Joseph. "The Structure of Hip Consumerism." *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. 2001. (pg. 4)

the festival and desire to fit in, that any rational reasons to not purchase merchandise (like saving money) are overshadowed by the irrational desire to look cool.

Heath also notes the idea of "conspicuous consumption," which suggests that individuals purchase material goods to 'one-up' each other, or show that he or she is wealthier than others.[23] While this may be true in some social settings, I argue that in the case of music festivals, individuals do not consume to prove their wealth and superiority among others. Instead, they purchase festival tickets and subsequently buy merchandise in an effort to 'fit in' with their peers and maintain an equal standing among them.

Another argument as to why people at music festivals purchase merchandise is the idea of "festival knowledge." Without being explicitly told, "festival virgins" learn how to behave through interaction with "festival veterans."[24] The newcomers will prove their similarity to the veterans by imitating their dress and behaviors at the festival; behaviors including commodity consumption.

According to scholar Theodor Adorno, consumption and music go hand-in-hand. He says that, "music, with all the attributes of the ethereal and sublime which are generously accorded it, serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music."[25] In other words, music exists to sell commodities such as CDs, T-shirts, and other products available for purchase at musical festivals (including the music festival ticket) rather than these commodities existing to make music available. Both the music makers and the listeners have become submerged in the commercial process, and neither is really free.

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[23] Heath, Joseph. (pg. 12)

[24] O'Grady, Alice and Kill, Rebekka. "Exploring Festival Performance as a State of Encounter." (pg. 275)

[25] Adorno, Theodor. "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in The Culture Industry, translated by S. and S. Weber London: Routledge Classics, 1991, pp. 27-60.

Adorno continues his argument to suggest that to a consumer, a commodity can be a fetish. So instead of a relationship existing between an individual and a musician, "commodity fetishism" claims that there is now a relationship between an individual's money and the musician's album. The individual gets a sense of satisfaction from purchasing the album –or in this case, music festival ticket –because the ticket serves as a reward for the work the individual had to do in order to buy it.[26]

Because each of the music festival attendees has purchased a ticket –and likely some other merchandise at the festival –they are similar to one another; at least on a surface level. In his article on social network, Gueorgi Kossinets refers to this concept that similar individuals are likely to associate with each other in social settings as "homophily."[27] He describes several variations of homophily, one of which is "value homophily," which considers similarity based on what people think.[28] This implies that individuals who think alike tend and share common interests tend to associate with each other regardless of the difference in their social status. Therefore, it can be argued that music festival attendees determine their similarity to one another through their shared commodities, and come together despite differences in social class. This puts everyone on the 'same level,' as they are all equally defined by their attendance at the festival and their commodity purchases.

When festival attendees show evidence of their commodities and festival attendance on social media (i.e. post pictures on Facebook or Instagram, write live updates on Twitter, or publish video clips of the festival on YouTube), they once again position themselves all on the 'same level,' equally defined by what they share. In the same study on the effects of recording

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[26] Adorno, Theodor. (pg. 36-46)
[27] Kossinets, Gueorgi. "Origins of Homophily in an Evolving Social Network." *American Journal of Sociology*. September 2009.
[28] Kossinets, Gueorgi. (pg. 434)

videos in live music concerts examined in the Literature Review, researchers Lingel and Naaman found that "the time devoted to sharing and interacting with content online is interpreted as signaling a commitment to the maintenance of social relationships."[29] That is, individuals record and publish evidence of their festival attendance on social media to reaffirm their placement in the "in crowd" and maintain their image of cool that was initially established at the music festival.

Referring back to Christopher Small's concept of 'musicking' –"to take part…in a musical performance"[30] –the process of using social media during a musical performance diminishes the meaning of the musical work. The message of music, Small also suggests, can only conveyed to the festival-goer if he or she participates in musicking. Therefore, if a music festival attendee is not aware of and involved in the performance (i.e. he or she is preoccupied using social media to reaffirm his or her image of cool), the relationship between music and the listener is void. Once again, this is evidenced in Lingel and Naaman's study, in which a concert attendee said that, "I definitely feel much more detached when I'm recording versus when I'm not recording.[31]

Implications, Suggestions, and Conclusion

The lack of participation with music at festivals, and subsequent depletion of message obtainment, is apparent in the behavior of many festival-goers today. Evidence of this can be seen, for example, in comedian Jimmy Kimmel's viral YouTube segment "Lie Witness News."[32]

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[29] Lingel, Jessica and Naaman, Mor. (pg. 335)
[30] Small, Christopher. (pg. 9)
[31] Lingel, Jessica and Naaman, Mor. (pg. 340)
[32] JimmyKimmel Live. "Lie Witness News: Coachella 2013." Online video clip. *YouTube*. 23 April 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_IzYUJANfk>

As a sort of prank, Kimmel sent a cameraman and member of his staff to the Coachella 2013 music festival. At the festival grounds, Kimmel's employee pretended to be a news anchor interviewing the public about what bands they were most looking forward to watching at Coachella that day. To prove that some of the festival-goers were simply there to socialize and were unaware of what music was actually being performed, the interviewer made up band names and asked passersby what they thought. Overall, the interactions between the interviewer and public illustrated festival-goers' ignorance to the musical works being performed. In one conversation, the interviewer talked to two teen girls about a made-up band called 'Dr. Shlowmo and the GI Clinic':

Interviewer: One of my favorite bands this year is Dr. Shlowmo and the GI Clinic.

Girl 1: They're amazing.

Girl 2: Yeah, I'm really excited to see them live.

Girl 1: It's going to be a highlight.

Although the girls' enthusiasm to see a band perform live may suggest involvement in the music, their inability to realize the band's non-existence shows that they have not, in fact, given attention to the lineup of the festival. Therefore, it can be argued that the girls are not focused on the musical performances. Instead, they may be preoccupied with the social aspect of the festival and their attempts to establish an identity of cool. If the girls had claimed on camera that they did not like Dr. Shlowmo and the GI Clinic –which was a real band as far as they knew –they would have distanced themselves with the rest of the crowd who (also, as far as they knew) liked the band.

In the clip, Girl 2 constantly looks at Girl 1 before answering any questions. Girl 2's body language suggests that she is unsure of herself, and she looks to Girl 1 for reassurance. That is, she looks to Girl 1 to make sure she says the right thing or the "cool" thing. This relates back to the idea of festival "virgins" and "veterans," where amateur festival attendees learn behavior from those who have previously attended in an attempt to be like them, and thus be cool.

Like in the "Coachella Survival Guide" video, one piece of advice that veterans give to newcomers is to buy merchandise at the music festival.[33] This promotion of consumerism is looked down on many people and organizations,[34] however, because of its potential negative effects.[35] One movement that seeks to lessen consumerism in America and persuade people to buy less material goods is the anti-consumerist movement. A specific tactic that many groups utilize is 'culture jamming,' which "seeks to undermine…the power structures governing cultural life…specifically through such practices as media hoaxing, corporate sabotage, billboard liberation, and trademark infringement."[36]

Examples of culture-jamming groups include Adbusters, whose goal is explained in their magazine *Adbusters: The Journal of the Mental Environment*:

> "What we're trying to do is pioneer a new form of social activism using all the power of the mass media to sell ideas, rather than products. We're motivated by a kind of 'greenthink' that comes from the environmental movement and isn't mired in the old ideology of the left and right. Instead, we take the environmental ethic

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[33] Salas, Christiana. "Coachella Survival Guide." Online video clip. *YouTube*. 10 April, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUJ3V0T3sSU>

[34] McClish, Carmen. "Activism Based in Embarrassment: The Anti-Consumption Spirituality of the Reverend Billy." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*. July 2009.

[35] McClish, Carmen: "Our private lives have disappeared under the dulling blanket of capitalist over-consumption; we shop not only to fill our lives with momentary pleasure, but also to be together, to belong, to avoid facing the unknown." (pg. 5)

[36] Harold, Christine. "Pranking rhetoric: "culture jamming" as media activism." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 17 February 2007. (pg. 190-192)

> into the mental ethic, trying to clean up the toxic areas of our minds. You can't recycle and be a good environmental citizen, then watch four hours of television and get consumption messages pumped at you."[37]

This group successfully fights against the powers of consumerism using the same mediums –magazines, billboards, television, etc. –that consumerism is promoted in the mainstream. By promoting their idea of anti-consumerism alongside pro-consumerist ads, they effectively reach their target audience. While anti-consumerist advertisements will likely not be shown on music festival grounds, it may prove beneficial for festival attendees to consider reducing their commodity consumption. The preoccupation of consumption and maintaining an identity of cool at music festivals has proven to weaken the musicking process, and thus nearly eliminate the intended meaning of the music to listeners. Social media, too, takes away from the musicking process. With all the focus on social media and commodity consumption at festivals, music now holds less significance than ever before.

[37] Motavalli, Jim (30 April 1996). "Cultural Jammin'". *E - The Environmental Magazine* **7** (3): 41.

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