

A FRAMEWORK FOR HIP

Hip and the Haphazard

This is how I found myself three times at the birth of movements that became labelled hip. Yet I do not think of myself as being hip. John Leland posits the theory that 'hip' is a social movement whose parameters are defined by the people watching it: hip factions come about haphazardly as 'a collision of peoples and ideas, thrown together in unplanned social experiments'.¹⁶ That certainly rings true: I was merely in the right place at the right time. However, looking back over the past two decades, it seems the haphazard had its own method of morphing ideas into networks. Seemingly disparate people – those labelled by others as hip – would eventually always flock together. This brings me to the six degrees of separation theory – that which says one person is never more than six connections from another. Malcolm Gladwell elaborates on this idea in his influential book *The Tipping Point*. According to this theory, as we associate with people who occupy the same physical spaces as us, a small number of people are inevitably linked. In my experience in the inner circles of a scene defined as hip by others, that separation tends to be reduced to one or two degrees. Kudos among non-conformists is accumulated through where you hang out and who you know. Being seen in places and name-dropping (and I do not mean this in a pejorative way) is a form of authentication. If you know so and so, it implies that you share a world-view.

I do not think of myself as being conceited. Yet hip is a form of self-conscious elitism and separatism. As with any identity construct, hip exists in relation to another identity. Someone is hip only because someone else is not. Hip operates within its own cultural distinctions, a thesis put forward by Sarah Thornton in *Club Cultures*, a seminal text in cultural studies. Hip is a set of binary oppositions such as 'the diverse' and 'the homogenous', 'the radical' and 'the conformist' or 'the distinguished' and 'the common'. Within this framework, a particular crowd is defined as hip in relation to a perpetually absent and often denigrated mainstream. In other words, the mainstreamers are the wannabes against whom the hipsters 'protect' their territory. Though no one ever admits to being a wannabe, it seems everybody wants to be a hipster.

This kind of elitism is not the preserve of self-consciously hip crowds. The British cultural theorist Raymond Williams set the precedent; his work provides the foundations of the discipline of cultural studies. In his conclusions about the

dichotomy between mass culture (barbaric, for the common masses) and high art (enlightening, for the distinguished minority), which had been at the heart of cultural debate since the advent of mass media and spread of television, Williams famously conceded that, 'There are, in fact, no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses.'¹⁷ By way of analogy, I would say that there are, in fact, no wannabes. There are only ways of seeing people as wannabes. Similarly, there are no hipsters – it is all a matter of perception.

The question then, is who 'decides' who the hipsters and wannabes are and from what vantage point? Not me. This book is not a directory of who's cool according to The Pimpette. Instead, I intend to locate the hipster and the wannabe within a specific framework.

Hip or cool? The words can be used interchangeably, and although 'hip' in this context has a longer history while 'cool' became fashionable in the 1990s with cool marketing, semantics do not much matter for my purposes here. In my story, I am scrutinising three movements that started small and went on to have a significant social impact. Small rock 'n' roll agitation – for which Omladinski Program became the loudest voice – was the main force for positive change under communism, subsequently becoming the strongest anti-war movement during the 1990s conflict in the former Yugoslavia. MTV is the best example of a 1990s cool marketing trend, which ultimately became the norm in the commercial sector and even redefined political marketing. The Hoxton story is that of a number of small trends that spawned various brands and a larger movement that redefined consumerism in the noughties. This will become apparent once I start my analysis and separate short-lived fads (such as the Hoxton Fin) from long-lasting effects (the general enduring legacy of Hoxton).

The process of a small group crossing over into a wider trend follows a specific trajectory. Here again, *The Tipping Point* is the most accomplished book on how small movements – ideas, trends or specific behaviours – become big trends: this moment Gladwell dubs the 'tipping point'. There is no need here to reinvent the wheel – just to recapitulate the gist of his argument. Gladwell uses the six degrees of separation theory as his starting point. In this context, he talks of mavens (the brokers of information), connectors (those who spread information, mainly via word of mouth) and salesmen (the persuaders) as the protagonists of processes that make the obscure visible.

To put an aspect of the separation theory into context, I can see from my own

experience that it made sense for me, when I was an alternative youth broadcaster in Eastern Europe, to contact MTV and for them, as an aspiring pan-European youth channel, to reciprocate. We were on different sides of the Iron Curtain but our mindset was the same: our lingua franca was rock 'n' roll. Then there was the novelty of our physical space becoming reconfigured under new communication technologies. Being in the right place at the right time essentially meant that both of us turned a set of circumstances into an opportunity to act as 'connectors' – or the special few who constructed communities of interest – and did so ungoverned by rules of proximity.

Degrees of separation provide only a partial explanation for the tipping point that primarily accounts for the occurrence of fads (for example 'unfashionable' Hush Puppy shoes becoming fashionable again, a case study explored in *The Tipping Point*). However, I am interested in paradigm shifts. There must be a series of fads to create such a large movement. So let me bring the diffusion model into this bigger picture. This refers specifically to the challenge of innovation, about 'breaking' new ideas or products originating from a small group. In such a scenario there is the barrier of world-views: the smaller group of innovators and the early adopters of ideas are the partisans of change, whereas the majority of people would be sceptical. This is where mavens, connectors and salesmen play a central role, over time, in translating original ideas into a more universal language...

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An inadvertent catalyst for this book's hypothesis was the Hoxton Pimps. Around the time the Hoxton Pimps ceased to be (mid-noughties), I met up with the founder of a cool brand innovation agency from the late 1990s business revolution, which had eventually been taken over by a communication conglomerate. This agency produced an annual youth tracking report which aimed to show potential clients that they were in touch with the latest trends – implicitly equating youth culture with emerging trends. Two pillars of coolness ruled. The first involved new media and technology (my colleague appeared to be fixated on the online community Second Life). The other was the corporate understanding of street culture (warehouse, graffiti, that sort of thing). Ironically, they cited Hoxton Pimps as an example of cool street culture, but from the period when it had gone overground. (If their cool hunter had really been cool – truly the first to know –

they would have discovered the Pimps about three, if not four, years earlier. I also had no heart to tell him that I was, in fact, The Pimpette.) This late discovery of trends was becoming typical of corporate cool hunters. Instead of being a step ahead, they were lagging behind. Many findings were no longer based on first-hand experience. Furthermore, Ranx and his friends, including The Pimpette, were no longer youths – we were all on the wrong side of 30. Some of the core team were in their twenties, but others were in their forties and fifties. The point is that age did not matter really; attitude was the thing.

Hoxton Pimps was one little clique that fitted the street aesthetic but there was a lot of stuff going on underground that did not fit into that canon and, if anything, was a reaction against it. An emblematic movement from this period was Cast Off: the Knitting Club, something I was closely involved with. When I mentioned this venture to my fellow brand consultant, he looked blank; he simply did not get it. For sure, knitting was not traditionally cool, far from it – but things changed. The man appeared to be oblivious to the potential of hip radically reinventing itself, in spite of my attempts to try to convince him to think outside the box. I suggested that youth culture was not the sole indicator of future trends and that there was a whole universe outside Second Life. He thought I was near the edge; I thought his ideas were dated. Years later, in 2007, I came across an article about the imminent publication of the aforementioned youth tracking monitor. They'd changed their tune. There was now a backlash against social networking, we were told. My colleague was quoted saying that young people could not keep on top of Second Life and the like, and that they were reverting to knitting! Just for the record, Cast Off, which triggered the new knitting hype – and by extension, craft movement – began in 2000. If their intention was to be the first to know, then frankly, they'd missed the boat. Or else youth culture really *isn't* setting all the trends.

Our conflicting interpretations of what constituted the leading edge led me to formulate the hypothesis of this book (or my killer hook). Could it be that for the first time in (marketing) history we have a case of parents being cooler than their kids? Could it be that the next non-conformist generation that rebelled against 1990s hip is Generation X – older still? Could it be that the Shoreditch phenomenon – developed off the back of the decade that peaked with Cool Britannia – inaugurated the post-youth-culture era? If in the 1980s 'video killed the radio star' to become the new cool that defined the 1990s, in the noughties, knitting became the new rock 'n' roll. If that's the case – and this book shall

provide much evidence for it – then this movement is cooler than cool. In other words, it is a cycle ahead of the corporate cool. Call it über cool. If so, what are the implications for the marketing industry and wider society?

In order to address this issue, I shall use the same hip framework for each decade. Essentially, it is my favourite type of futurology: anticipating the future by looking at the past. I shall take hip's 1960s framework and map it onto the 1990s and then use that same method for the noughties. In each decade, it will be about subcultures and maverick businesses coming together to challenge the status quo, spur on change in established business models and ultimately influence the mainstream style and communication industries. It will also be about a contribution to identity politics. With every subcultural coming-of-age moment, there will be a step towards positive change in the guise of facilitating liberties...