

Exploring dress, identity and performance in contemporary dance music culture

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Abstract

Electronic dance music and its associated cultures have experienced significant growth and diversification in recent decades, evolving from their origins in the warehouse, acid house and rave 'scenes'. The myriad of interrelated scenes under the umbrella term 'dance culture' provides a range of aesthetic and social event experiences, where participants can experiment with and perform multiple identities. This paper explores the significance of dress and identity within dance culture, drawing on an autoethnographic study which included participant observation, field trips, online research, focus groups and interviews. It investigates performance and presentation of identity within these commodified places, in particular how participants negotiate and traverse various credible roles. It suggests that the performance metaphor is useful in conceptualising event spaces and demonstrates the hugely significant role that dress and identity play in the construction and consumption of these events.

Keywords: youth culture; identity; festivals; clubbing; dress; performance

Introduction

Music, fashion and identity have always been inextricably linked and youth cultures have often been defined through their particular music and fashion tastes (Bennett, 1999; Hebdige, 1979; Huq, 2006; Jackson, 2004; Thornton, 1997; Wilson, 2006). Shared values in terms of music and fashion engender group cohesion, foster a sense of togetherness and create an air of exclusivity, defining who is and is not 'cool' or 'in the know' (Malbon, 1999; Muggleton, 2000; Thornton, 1995; Wilson, 2006). This in turn helps perpetuate the feeling of uniqueness experienced by participants who are part of such cultures and contributes to the unique qualities and features of a variety of leisure and event spaces, including dance music spaces (Jaimangal-Jones, 2010). Identity is a common thread that weaves through the discourses of youth culture and is closely tied to notions of subculture, authenticity, the mainstream, the media, resistance and incorporation, performance, space, style and belonging. Expressed through a desire to be associated with particular practices, institutions, cultural products and discourses, whether consciously or subconsciously (Epstein, 1998), such processes of interpretation and response entail that in different scenarios, in differing contexts and at different points in time we perform different identities (Rojek, 2005). Thus far from being singular or static, identities are both

multiple and fluid, based on continual processes of interpretation, interaction and modification – with individuals having multiple identities which are perfected and performed in various social settings (Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1969).

This paper considers how membership of and participation in youth leisure cultures, despite being unstable and fraught with insecurity, also enable and facilitate a sense of belonging and identity (Roberts, 1997). Indeed the paper argues leisure activities such as clubbing constitute a point of reference, identification and group assimilation for many seeing the fracturing of communities, the blurring of class distinctions and uncertain futures, where many people's sense of self-identity is more fluid than ever (Huq, 2006). In respect of dress and identity, Saucier (2011, p. 53) comments how 'fashion is a primary symbol in the construction and reconstruction of identity ... Fashion is dynamic in that it allows individuals to express individual and group difference, while also allowing conformity with a group'. This paper explores the interplay between fashion, dress and identity in the context of contemporary dance music events and the performances that take place within them to reveal the significance, signification and the negotiation and evaluation of identity performances within dance music spaces. It has been argued that dance music events are socially and physically constructed as distinct, different, liminal spaces (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010); this paper seeks to expand understandings of event spaces as sites of performance through utilising the performance metaphor as a conceptual framework to examine the interplay between dress, identity, space and performance in dance music culture. This research adopted an ethnographic approach and revealed a range of issues which are thematically analysed under the following headings: 'Dress codes and conventions' examines the role of dress codes within clubbing spaces in terms of participant perceptions of clubs/ events, their interactions within such spaces and the role of dress codes and conventions to the social construction of these event spaces. 'People watching and identity' explores the level of interest amongst participants in observing the identity performance of others, particularly at large festival-type events, and (linked to dress codes and conventions) analyses the identities performed by different subgroups within dance music culture. 'Borrowed styles and cultural continuities' considers the interplay between dance cultures and other cultural groupings in terms of ideologies and fashion preferences, whilst also considering the symbolic value of clothing. 'Anonymity and multiple identities' then examines how and why approaches to identity performance in dance culture are rarely played out on the streets breaking from subcultures of the past. The paper concludes that dress and identity are highly significant to the social construction and consumption of dance music events, their appeal to individuals and to participant perceptions and interactions within such spaces. It also emphasises the value of ethnography and the performance metaphor in the exploration and analysis of event spaces and leisure activities.

Considering identity and performance

Identity is complex and multifaceted, with its roots in individuals' cultural experiences and associated discourses – it is a product of symbolic interactions past, present and future (Blumer, 1969). Identity is central to perceptions of self and others, to the constitution and functioning of social groups, it is fuelled by ideologies of individualism and autonomy central to contemporary consumer societies, whereby their constituents strive for individuality, whilst seeking acceptance within the various social spheres with which they engage (Hall, 1997). These social spheres and their etiquette require the construction of multiple identities to fulfil individual needs for social acceptance and credibility, whilst maintaining a sense of autonomy over presentation of self (Kaiser, 1990; Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991). Issues of identity and identification have emerged from earlier work on dance culture, as Thornton (1995, p. 91) states 'fantasies of identity are a key pleasure' of participation in club cultures, whilst Jackson (2004, p. 158) considers that 'the construction of identity becomes an ongoing creative project aimed towards the creation of a sense of personal and social authenticity'. Dance clubs enable experimentation with and development of identities based upon what is acceptable, permissible and expected of actors upon any given stage. Given the diversification of dance music culture and the alternative norms and values associated with it, the parameters of permissible identity performances within dance music

environments are significantly different to those in many other contemporary social leisure settings due to the norms and values associated with such spaces (Jackson, 2004; Jaimangal-Jones, 2010).

Whilst Thornton (1995) focuses on the artefacts of 'subcultural capital' as pertinent to identity, such as clothing, language, music and events, Jackson (2004, p. 158) considers identity to be 'grounded in practices rather than signs' such as expression through language, interactions, dancing and event attendance. Arguably notions of identity, including perceptions of others, are influenced by and constructed through the experiences of practice accompanied by the presence of and association with subcultural 'signs', texts and objects (Barker & Galasinski, 2001). Indeed many different objects and events can be read as cultural texts (Ervin, 2000; Slater, 1998), these are not limited to things produced specifically to represent or communicate cultural meanings and encompass elements such as dress and representative media. Another significant consideration in the analysis of texts is their intertextual nature, whereby additional meaning is generated through the relationship and symbolic interactions between texts. As meaning is interpreted in the context of the signs and systems of signification within individual texts, so are texts related to others within the social world (Fairclough, 1992). 'That is, intertextuality signals the accumulation and generation of meaning across texts where all meanings depend on other meanings' (Barker and Galasinski, 2001, p. 69). Thus no text stands alone as completely independent or original but is influenced, both in its generation and interpretation, by the myriad of cultural texts available (Foucault, 1980). It is the juxtaposition of practice and signs, their intertextual nature and the corresponding interactions, perceptions and interpretations of such cultural elements that combine to influence and create distinctive images of self and others. Thus particular items of clothing, labels, accessories and combinations of items will be representative of the extent to which individuals belong within certain spaces, their awareness of privileged cultural discourses and their level of cultural capital. A range of signs and practices revolving around visual presentation and interactions with others are used within dance music environments to express particular identities and to assess the identities of others. Dance events and the cultures that surround them permit and entail the development of identities, which facilitate identification in these and other cultural realms, fulfilling individual needs for personal exploration and self-development in a wider social context.

Identity formation within dance culture involves considerably more than the acquisition, development and maintenance of high levels of subcultural capital as highlighted by Thornton, (1995). Although subcultural capital is an useful concept, significant to the construction of hierarchies within club cultures, the intertextual nature of the components of subcultural capital and the subjectivity surrounding their interpretation is highly significant. At this juncture issues of life experience, particularly the degrees and nature of subcultural involvement/ participation, social networks and media consumption and exposure are highly influential in the interpretation of subcultural texts, providing for a myriad of outcomes from the processes of intertextuality, and hence, attributing a great diversity of values and associations to the cultural texts of dance culture. The nature of the interactions with and interpretation of cultural texts and the combination of their outcomes is therefore central to the composition and definition of individual identities.

Notions of performance (Goffman, 1969; Schechner, 2003) are appropriate for providing the conceptual framework for analysing identity formation and development within dance music culture. The notion that life is a series of performances encompassing a variety of settings and scripts creates an useful theoretical perspective to analyse the processes involved in the presentation of self, perceptions of others and interactions with event spaces. Within this framework, the clubs, events and other places of cultural interaction (record shops, bars, parties, internet fora, etc.) constitute the stages/settings of performances (Doorne & Ateljevic, 2005). For each setting, there exists a range of physical and aesthetic features and qualities, atmospheres and ambiances (determined by the properties of the stage and the actors present at a given time). Each setting or stage also has its own values, codes and identity performance parameters influenced by the actors (clubbers) present, the directors (promoters, owners, site masters) responsible for the selection and construction of the stage (including the recruitment of actors) and the various media and stakeholders which are central to the construction of wider discourses within dance culture. These factors all shape individual identity performance (and perceptions of others) within these various social settings (Goffman, 1969). As Klein (2003, p. 44) comments:

The field of pop is itself structured by a relational structure of the connections between different players: DJs, musicians, producers of music and video, publishers, music critics and promoters. They engage in ... a game of power over what legitimates pop as pop and what is of worth within the symbolic economies of the pop cultural field. Those who play the most important roles in this game are the 'legitimate speakers' (Bourdieu 1990). They are legitimated by their social positioning in the pop cultural field and confirm this legitimation with the negotiation of 'aesthetic dispositions'.

Clothes are a central element of individual identity performance, representing a visual statement of an individual's self-perception and role performance. As Hall (1997, p. 37) states 'clothes also double up as signs. They construct a meaning and carry a message'. Clothes act as signifiers, and certain styles and combinations are linked with specific socially constructed concepts such as fashionable, cool, formal and informal (Brydon & Neissen, 1998). Therefore, at different times and in different places, particular clothing styles and combinations are adopted to convey a specific persona to a specific audience (Schechner, 2003). The connotations of clothing also mean that different audiences will interpret clothing in different ways in terms of its appeal and its appropriateness for certain occasions. As Baldwin, Longhurst, McCracken, Ogborn and Smith (2004, p. 290) state:

Fashion itself has a customary basis. It exemplifies a dual tension ... between differentiation and affiliation. On the one hand the fashionable individual wants to stand out from the crowd and appear special. On the other hand, by dressing in a certain style the individual is displaying a kinship with other similarly fashionable individuals.

Interestingly, although 'the body' has emerged in sociology, cultural studies and other fields in the last 20 years, social theory has been less concerned with body matters such as dress and fashion (Hebdige, 1979; Turner, 1984). The study of fashion and dress has been doubly disadvantaged since academic neglect of the body marginalised the study of dress and both have been dismissed by 'serious' research fields (Neissen & Bryden, 1998). Whilst contemporary gender studies has since taken up the challenge to integrate dress, fashion and the body, they have long been seen as a frivolous feminine indulgence, linked to pleasure and leisure (Steele, 2010). Gronow (1997, p. 74) echoes this assessment, noting that there is very little mention of fashion in the theories of post-industrial society and that it 'seems to have been too ephemeral and frivolous a social phenomenon to have been taken seriously'. The fashion historian Valerie Steele (1991) further argues that those who consider themselves 'serious' intellectuals have long deliberately eschewed stylish or fashionable clothing as somehow suggestive of a diminished intellectual capacity – considering that great minds are oblivious to the body and its adornment. As a result, fashion and dress remain under-explored within sociological and cultural studies, so that 'the *dressed body* as a discursive and phenomenological field vanishes and dress is disembodied' (Entwistle, 2002, p. 136).

Despite this intellectual marginalisation, fashion can be described as 'nothing more and nothing less than the systematic encryption, transmission, and interpretation of social meaning' (Solomon, 1985, p. xi). Certainly, dress (with its close proximity to the body) carries enormous social, cultural and political meaning and is intimately bound up with broader social and historical concerns about the regulation and performance of bodies and identities in social spaces. Dress offers opportunities for both social distinction and identification and for self-expression (Wilson, 1985), it is both a private and a social experience and 'any understanding of the dressed body must acknowledge the social nature of it – how it is shaped by techniques, attitudes, aesthetics ... which are socially and historically located' (Entwistle, 2002, p. 134).

Study approach and methods

This research adopted an autoethnographic approach over a five year period, utilising a combination of ethnographic methods revolving around participant observation, e.g. field trips, participant interviews, focus group and online research, whilst also utilising the first author's experiences in an autoethnographic context to inform the research study. As the first author was already a participant in dance culture, he undertook the fieldwork and contributed the autoethnographic element to the study. Lofland (1971) states a number of requirements for researchers reporting on cultures, primarily raising the need for proximity to the culture under examination. The researcher should be, 'close

in the physical sense ... over some significant period of time and variety of circumstances'. They should develop 'closeness in the social sense of intimacy and confidentiality' and gain 'access to the activities of the set of people through their entire round of life' (Lofland, 1971, p. 3). These issues are pertinent to the integrity ethnographic research, and also point to the benefits of autoethnography, for researchers already belonging to cultural groups will be able to achieve these requirements more easily. As the research team included a researcher who was also a participant, participant observation was a natural choice of method as an 'omnibus strategy' (Ervin, 2000). It encompasses multiple methods enabling the researcher to explore and understand the cultural group in question by learning from them – studying their behaviour and questioning the significance and meaning behind their actions and words (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Spradley, 1980).

Using participant observation reveals how individuals interact with elements of their social world, the symbolic nature and elements of their lifestyles and experiences, and how these all interrelate with each other and the wider society (Ervin, 2000). Consequently, the role of the researcher and their influence on the research process is a fundamental issue in ethnography, where the researcher must be aware of and reflect upon their own values and beliefs, in order to temper their impact on research findings (Coffey, 1999; Davies, 1999). The need for reflexivity was particularly pertinent in this research with its autoethnographic elements. As the first author was a participant in dance culture, this reduced reactivity of participants during participant observation and created a valuable resource, but also meant they had to balance and reflexively adapt to the tenets of ethnography to achieve the research objectives. However, reflexivity concerns more than recognising the 'researcher's affect on data', it also considers 'the more active role of the researcher in the actual production of those data' (Davies, 1999, p. 8). One has to scrutinise every element of one's thoughts and actions, to acknowledge one's influence and use one's knowledge and experience to inform and enhance the research (Walsh, 1998).

Therefore, when a researcher becomes aware of the unique features, elements, attitudes and values attributed to his or her social group, how it has evolved and continues to evolve, then he or she will be able to provide more insight into these issues than outsiders. Through introspection and careful self-analysis, these issues and processes may be examined and explored to produce valuable insights (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Miller & Brewer, 2003). It should also be noted that due to the fragmentation within the dance music scene, the first author was no more than a participant observer in many situations. Such is the diversity of 'dance culture' there are numerous club scenes the first author has no experience of at all; observing these and then contrasting them with those more familiar, facilitated a more analytical and critical approach to the observations, leading to more insightful findings in the research process.

This paper draws upon findings arising from participant observation at 35 events in England and Wales, unstructured and semi-structured interviews (before, during and after events), online discussions and a focus group. The research took place between 2001 and 2006 and encompassed a range of events from smaller club-based events to large-scale festival-type events. In total, over 30 club events were attended and five large-scale festivals. The club events were selected for their various sizes, locations and genres of music, and provided opportunities to observe, participate in and speak to people from a range of different genre-based scenes. The larger dance festivals catered for a range of genres and thus provided opportunities to observe and study participants from different geographical regions and genres in one location. During the initial stages of the research, a significant amount of time was spent participating and observing at a range of dance events and on internet discussion forums, in total, over 150 different message board and forum threads from a range of dance music-orientated websites were monitored, created or contributed during the research. This facilitated a construction of background data through reflecting on experiences, informal interactions, interviews and group discussions, facilitated the transition from participant to participant observer and provided an additional means of triangulation. As the research progressed events were attended, observations made and conversations held regarding participants' pre-event preparations, journeys to events, the events themselves and post-event reflections. These field trips were followed by a series of eight in-depth semi-structured interviews and a focus group with participants ranging in age from those in their late teens to some in their early 40s. During these conversations, interviews and focus groups, a wide range of issues were discussed in relation to the events they had attended and their thoughts on wider dance culture. As the next section discusses, issues associated with dress, identity and performance featured prominently for many of

these individuals (who are identified by their own chosen pseudonyms), and emerges as a significant feature of the wider social construction of dance music spaces.

Results and discussion

Issues of dress and identity emerge as central to dance music events in a whole range of implicit and explicit ways in terms of attracting people to particular clubs and events and their experiences there. This section explores how conventions and approaches to dress and identity performance influence the construction of dance music spaces (stages) and people's interactions with and within them. Dress codes appear as a significant issue for participants with many negative associations regarding dress codes and the role they fulfil in the creation of dance spaces and the identity performances they permit. Both formally and informally enforced dress codes are discussed for their contribution to the development and maintenance of the properties of clubbing stages. Some of the more unique and distinctive approaches to identity performance found within dance music events and the attraction of 'people watching' are also explored, highlighting the unique identity performances permitted at dance events and participants' interest in the identity performances of others. The discussion also considers some of the clothing styles found in clubbing contexts and the sharing of styles across youth cultures and the symbolic value of clothes. Finally, the discussion considers a key difference between dance culture and other youth cultures, namely that it is mainly within specific events that these elaborate and distinct approaches to identity performance are realised; within other social settings, its participants are relatively anonymous (in comparison to youth cultures of the past) as they blend in with prevailing mainstream fashion trends and preferences.

'Dress to impress' – dress codes and conventions

As dress and bodily adornment are the most obvious and visual elements of individual identity performance, they represent the extent to which people belong and 'fit' in specific social settings and their application of cultural knowledge to the process of identity performance. Dress codes and conventions were explored to exemplify their centrality to many club admission policies, determining who is and who is not a legitimate actor on particular dance music stages, leading to the creation of events which encourage and restrict specific identity performance. In addition, even when not overtly advertised or enforced by venues themselves, clubbing crowds can have a powerful effect of generating and enforcing dress codes as comments which follow will demonstrate.

Crowd composition and resulting dynamics play a significant role in stage creation within dance music events, for they achieve highly specific crowds by drawing on wide geographical markets, but 'narrower demographics and taste specialisations' (Thornton, 1995, p. 22). In addition, the specialist media and advertising vehicles through which dance events are publicised, the dance music media, youth radio, flyers (placed in specific outlets), fly posting and club listings, all help attract the 'right' crowd. Finally (although often complained about by clubbers), the bouncers and/or door selectors are the last stage in the crowd selection process for clubs, granting or denying admittance based on conformity to the club's entrance policy. These processes mean that clubbing crowds have a high degree of similarity and conformity in their musical, fashion and media preferences, and the processes they have gone through to negotiate entry and the sharing of the experience create a sense of identification. Thus the identity performances permissible within different events are semi-prescribed and semi-self-determined or self-selected by the prevailing discourses and the subsequent codes of conduct, interaction and presentation within given settings. These are highly influential to the roles which actors are able to adopt, creating physical barriers (in the sense of door selection policies) and psychological barriers (perceptions of behavioural ideologies) to role determination. These factors are also accompanied by more personal influences such as peer groups and the roles of others within these groups; community norms and peer pressure mean that clubbing companions significantly affect the roles performed by individuals at different events. Equally, the dance music media discourses also have a powerful effect on role performance through their reporting on events (Jaimangal-Jones, 2012). However, there remains a high degree of subjectivity in the interpretation of discourse and the degree to which individuals are willing to conform to the roles expected of them. There are always individuals who wish to stand out, to make

the statement that they are unique and those who do not. Added to this are the varying discourses and cultural texts which individuals are exposed to, which in turn influence their interpretation of their cultural experiences, their self-identity and approach to role performances.

Numerous comments emerged from the online research, participant observation, interview and focus group research surrounding dress codes, for example, 'Mr Curious' commented: 'Clubs with a dress code are a put off as you are unsure you will be allowed in, [this leads to a] fear of being embarrassed through rejection and lack of knowledge of dress etiquette for other genres'. Dance music cultures and club scenes revolve around musical genres, their fashion and style associations, events and their associated discourses. Thus clubbers involved in a particular scene have to acquire the cultural knowledge and be familiar with the dress etiquette at particular clubs to become a credible performer. Knowing what is expected by dress codes such as 'fresh and funky club wear', 'cool', 'glamorous', 'smart casual' and 'no effort no entry' (which are open to much interpretation) demonstrates the value of insider knowledge, which is often required when accessing liminal spaces (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010). Others unfamiliar with cultural discourses surrounding specific clubs and scenes may dress inappropriately and be refused entry on the basis of their lack of effort and cultural knowledge. The enforcement of such performance parameters through dress codes fosters further exclusivity of clubbing spaces and simultaneously increases the value of insider knowledge, enhancing the cultural credibility of those 'in the know' and those 'cool' enough to gain access – features common to many subcultures. Here, we can also see dress codes operating as a reward for those with significant cultural knowledge and as a penalty for those who lack it.

It appears there is a paradoxical relationship between many clubbers and dress codes, where on the one hand, they can generate a pretentious air around certain events, they also act as a cultural filter as part of the stage selection process. The following comments from an online forum discussion also demonstrate how many participants perceive dress codes at dance venues as 'pretentious'. However, individuals acknowledge that even venues without explicit dress codes have unwritten ones to prevent the wrong sort of people – 'scallys' – gaining access and spoiling the liminal dynamic of clubbing spaces.

I have had it with pretentious clubs – had a shite night on Saturday ... Where have all the sweaty house nights gone? [I] cannot be arsed with [people saying] 'what's she got on – is it Prada – no it isn't – what shoes has she got on?' It's all bollocks. (Fox)

For all it gets great DJs and I've had some great nights there I'd have to put Basics down as one of the worst cases of cliquey, snooty clubs around. If you don't know the right people and aren't wearing the right clothes it can be a pain in the arse. (Sven)

Fox!!! You sooooo need to get your arse over to the Redlight!! NO pretentiousness! (if that's a word) just great house music with a great crowd! You can wear what you like practically, within reason obviously! If you come dressed as a scally, you deserved to get knocked back ... I promise you, you'll love it!!!. (CrazyRaveKid)

Although the majority of dance events have no explicit dress codes, the above comments also demonstrate how failure to come appropriately dressed can impact on people's enjoyment of events and undermine their status as legitimate performers in certain clubbing settings. Because people immediately judge others in terms of their cultural knowledge, their understanding of the ethos of the event in question and even their responsiveness to interacting with others by what they are wearing. Whilst presentational conventions, such as dress codes, are considered as trivial and undesirable by many clubbers, all clubs and events have a spectrum of presentational conventions acceptable to gain entry. What differentiates events is the breadth of this spectrum and styles of dress it encourages and permits. Such conventions of presentation and performance facilitate levels of cohesion within club (and other event) environments as those present are effectively filtered to demonstrate shared cultural values and levels of cultural knowledge, which in turn puts others present at ease. 'There is a presumption at dance events that those who have located and negotiated the threshold of the door are accepted in and more importantly accepting of the performance that constitutes the dance event' (Jaimangal-Jones, 2010, p. 157).

From another perspective, due to the competitive nature of club promotion, promoters seek various means of differentiating their products within the market and since the clubbing scene is now so diverse, dress codes are one means of aiding this process. This has resulted in the creation

and promotion of various clubbing stages which promote a diversity of dress codes including fancy dress, fetish, interesting costumes, glamorous or 'sexy' clothing, no trainers or sportswear, etc. Simultaneously, the inseparability of production and consumption in the event experience means that customers constitute part of the product, so the presence of attractively and outrageously dressed people also contributes to the overall spectacle of the experience. Dress codes promoting unusual dress styles can contribute to people 'letting go' and assuming different roles within the club environment as they are permitted to perform identities distinctly different to those of their everyday life. On one level then, dress codes (and such measures) could be interpreted as another means of attracting customers and building brand images in a competitive market. However, they constitute far more than this as they allow individuals the opportunity to experiment with alternative identities and constitute a filter in the provision of stages on which such performances can take place.

The range of dress styles present in the various different club events and the individual arenas in festivals was illustrative of the alternative identity performances permitted in such spaces as these fieldwork notes show. The following quote relates to the Gatecrasher Summer Sound System festival, which was operated by the clubbing brand Gatecrasher, a major player in the house and trance music scenes. Gatecrasher is one of the original dance music super clubs, which has subsequently developed into a global brand involved in running a range of clubs and dance events in venues across the world:

In the Gatecrasher Arena there were a large number of people dressed in psychedelic, day-glo colours and many of the men wore futuristic or space-age looking tops and trousers, with what appeared to be protective body panels on arms, legs and often chests. Many of the women sported fluorescent tops or trousers, fluffy tops, skirts and large fluffy boots whilst many people wore clothing with the Gatecrasher logo and yet others had clothing displaying other dance brands.

The dress styles at this event are reflective of the different participants in trance and hard dance scenes, these scenes are also the most popular and commercialised genres of dance culture in the UK. Both feature futuristic, fast, techno music (trance and hard house) and the majority of their crowds are younger (generally aged 17–24) than the average for other dance genres. The clothing worn by their participants are also reflective of the musical style and aesthetics, being loud and technologically and futuristically orientated as well as being vibrant and youthful (Jaimangal-Jones, 2005).

It was notable how many participants observed at different events identified with particular clubbing brands illustrating the importance of these brands to those particular individuals and the extent to which they are inextricably linked to their clubbing identities. This was evident in the particular scenes mentioned above, with many people wearing clothing featuring dance music brands. In addition, many of the out-fits displaying brand logos at these events were handmade. This demonstrates not only identification with the brands but also these individuals' customisation and embodiment of the music brands through their own dress. Again, this is seen in fieldwork notes:

There seems to be a trend within the most commercialised sections of dance culture towards brand endorsement amongst clubbers with higher propensity amongst participants in the trance, hard trance and hard house scenes to visibly demonstrate their affiliation to particular event brands. In addition to those wearing the Gatecrasher brand, many individuals at the festival wore clothing featuring brands such as Sundissential and Godskitchen. Many of these articles were also handmade, a further illustration of the extent to which many clubbers wish to embody their affiliation to these brands. There are very few clubs that achieve this level of recognition, whereby clubbers want to wear clothing bearing the club brand logo – much of which is actually customized and home-made (Jaimangal-Jones, 2005).

These observations demonstrate how certain club brands develop cult followings as a consequence of sophisticated branding, media support, the unique environments and experiences they provide their customers. Through the promotion of discourses of escapism, hedonism, spectacle, rebellion, community and cultural distinction, certain clubbing brands become central to individual clubbing identities, as they seek through association and performance to incorporate these

discourses into their own identities. The clothing could be interpreted as symbolic of technological embracement, youthfulness and escapism in terms of style with brash colours and futuristic decals. Their differentiation from mainstream fashion also demonstrates cultural distinction and rebellion from the norms and values of wider society, whilst also signifying a willingness to embrace the liminal properties and practices associated with these events (Jaimangal-Jones, 2010).

‘What *is* she wearing?’ – people watching and identity

In the context of this discussion on dress and affiliations, it is interesting to note that interviews and observations reveal that ‘people watching’ is also a major appeal of larger festival events. This demonstrates that participants are concerned not only with their own dress and identities but equally how others negotiate and perform their identities. In discussing how much she enjoyed a particular festival ‘A Girl’ said: ‘One of my favourite elements was the spectacle of all the costumed people in their day-glo and fancy dress outfits’ which she found both ‘interesting and funny’. Another interviewee commented:

The best elements were the general atmosphere of festivity and the music. The place as a whole with the variety of people (interesting people watching), all the arenas, stalls and fairground rides were the best bits ... plus the Gatecrasher and Tidy Trax Arenas for their atmosphere, ambience and music. (Ms Thoughtful)

Many participants comment on the enjoyment and amusement they derive from observing others’ dress and the general atmosphere of carnivalesque created by the range of ‘alternative’ identities being performed at the larger festivals (Bahktin, 1984; Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009). It is apparent that there is a greater range of credible and permissible identities on display at these events than at other clubbing venues as their range of music genres is wider and the crowd thus more eclectic. In individual arenas of most festivals, however, one tends to find more similarity in the music and the crowd akin to the particular clubs which cater for these genres.

Observations and conversations reveal distinct differences between the perceptions of older and younger participants in dance music culture and between participants in different ‘scenes’. Whilst many of the younger people were prepared to attend the festival events dressed in very revealing and brightly coloured clothes, some of the older participants were amused, intrigued and in some cases shocked by this choice of clothing, as demonstrated by the quotes below. This was largely because of the alternative contexts in which these individuals participate in dance culture, where other role performance conventions prevail. It also perhaps illustrates a greater self-confidence and willingness to ignore outsiders’ opinions amongst youth cultures. It is their identity within the group which they value and they remain dedicated to their culture, its ideologies and its aesthetics. The following extract from a focus group conversation illustrates these points.

‘Unknown’: ‘Well ... I quite enjoyed the people watching, that was fun, a lot of them were quite funny’.

Researcher: ‘What aspect was that, the day-glo costumes and fancy dress?’

‘Unknown’: ‘Yeah, some of them were dressed up, some of them I was like, I can’t believe you’re wearing that and ... the people (laughs) like all the bloody girls that seemed to think their arses were acceptable for fucking G-strings and like hot-pants.’

Researcher: ‘Were you expecting that or did it take you by surprise a bit?’

‘Unknown’: ‘It did a bit, I kind of expected it, but not to that extent it was like, I don’t know, it’s not how many or how much was revealed. Maybe it’s just I’m used to looking at those sort of trousers on that person on a flyer or something and you see it on someone else and its like you really shouldn’t have done that (everyone in the room starts laughing). No but I think it’s cool that they made the effort, ‘cos I felt quite boring, you know it’s quite cool that they dressed up so fair play to them, but a lot of them really shouldn’t have worn what they did wear (laughs again). Bitch, bitch, bitch, (laughs again)’.

This also relates to audience interpretation, as Kaiser (1990, p. 200) comments:

When we dress, we also *address* some audience whose responses are essential to the establishment of our ideas about ourselves (Stone, 1965). In Stone’s terms we receive

reviews from our audiences, which come in the form of social feedback as well as challenges to develop new *programs* (appearances).

The contexts in which people participate in dance culture (and hence the audiences to which they perform) provide feedback for ongoing identity development, both inspiring and redirecting approaches to role performance. Therefore, although many of the individuals spoken to in the course of this research find elaborate approaches to role performance quite entertaining, more significant for those performing such identities are the reactions of their intended audience, i.e. their peers, it is the inspiration gained from such experiential consumption that encourages these individuals to dress so outrageously. Those assumed identities which are greeted with approval amongst the audience are developed, whilst those which make individuals feel out of place, uncomfortable or unaccepted are modified or abandoned. As much as 'appearances convince others about who we are' they also 'render credibility to behaviour' (Kaiser, 1990, p. 196). An extension of this hypothesis is that clothing facilitates, the adoption of alternative behavioural norms and values, which although different to an individuals' everyday conduct, are nonetheless credible when appropriately contextualised. Hence, wearing day-glo clothes at a trance or hard house event gives greater credibility, and hence, acceptance to someone acting extrovertly, as that is what many people would expect from someone in such attire. They are likely to be openly embraced and positively received within such an environment, serving as confirmation that the role performance is appropriate and authentic. Conversely, if someone was to dress and act in such a manner at a drum and bass club, they would probably encounter negative, hostile or indifferent reactions as such a role is inappropriate to the etiquette in the context of drum and bass clubs.

Borrowed styles and cultural continuities

Although, due to the symbiotic relationship between music and fashion, much of the clothing worn by participants reflects mainstream fashion, the adoption of the clothing styles of other niche youth cultures is also prevalent within certain subsections of dance culture. For example, it was observed how there are numerous parallels between the visual identities of many participants in drum and bass culture and other youth cultures such as skateboarders, surfers and BMXers. Within these respective cultural scenes, baggy jeans and hooded tops are shared styles, but they are also prevalent in other musically based youth cultures such as grunge, nu-metal and hip-hop. This illustrates the intertextual nature of these garments and continuities of style (Hebdige, 1979) across a number of youth cultures, which interestingly all possess an air of the more edgy and darker aspects of contemporary society and have a stronger underground ideology and anti-mainstream discourse.

From this research, it became apparent that many clubbers seek to distance themselves from what they regard as the monolithic 'mainstream' and the lowest common denominators of the pop culture industries (Thornton, 1995; Wilson, 2006). Individuals attempt to visibly distance themselves from the mainstream through the wearing of articles such as day-glo clothing, fancy dress, hooded tops and other clothing produced by less widely available and distributed brands. For example, within the drum and bass and dub-step scenes, clothing brands often relate to the music scene itself, e.g. record labels or niche activities, such as skateboarding and surfing, and are often only available at specialist outlets. Therefore, like the music they listen to, clubbers' clothes are often also less accessible and more specialist, which makes them (ideologically) more exclusive. In such ways, discourses regarding cultural accessibility, exclusivity and cultural capital are embodied in the identities performed by participants.

Anonymity and multiple identities

Contrary to many 'spectacular' subcultures of the past, much of the clothing worn by dance culture participants 'on the streets' is not unique, often constituting a strategic bricolage of contemporary clothing styles. It is only at dance music events where participants are able to engage in the more unique identity performances discussed in the sections above. The dress and fashion elements unique to dance music culture tend to be displayed only by certain dance cultures and are highly visible within specific club environments whilst generally being invisible on the street; hence, the club or event is the site of performance unlike in previous youth cultures (Hebdige, 1979). This retains the anonymity of the clubber on a day-to-day basis, for many

people do not wish to be openly associated with a culture surrounded by discourses of hedonism, escapism and illicit drug consumption (Jaimangal-Jones, 2012). Anonymity is a pervasive although not explicit discourse in dance culture, applicable to life both on the dance floor and on the streets, thus enabling participants to perform a variety of identities to gain acceptance and credibility within a variety of social and cultural settings. Indeed this issue is central to the postmodern condition as individuals perform multiple identities within different leisure and work settings (Rojek, 2005).

The wearing of different articles of clothing to create looks and styles demonstrates how dance events are sites of visual performance, which both enable and confirm role performance. Through selecting specific items of clothing participants both indicate to others how they perceive themselves and express their affiliation to particular musical genres, through embracing their stylistic aesthetics. As Kaiser (1990, p. 193) comments 'being cast in a role [or casting oneself into a role] is facilitated by "looking the part" and dressing in a costume that others have come to expect of a person in that role'. The clothes provide the visual props for participants to engage in what they and others deem to constitute authentic performances and desirable identities. Thus when individuals dress up for clubbing and dance events, it requires a personal and social negotiation process to ensure the compatibility of one's role for the performance stage. The individual must decide whether their dress enables them to portray themselves as legitimate and authentic members of their selected social grouping within a given performance setting. Much as the costume for a pantomime fairy would differ from the costume of an operatic fairy, so too must clubbers present themselves differently to be seen as legitimate upon different stages, as symbolic interactionism dictates (Blumer, 1969). It is the context in which clothing is worn that is as relevant as the clothing itself to role credibility within a given performance setting.

Behavioural values and associations

A common appeal of dance music events raised by participants is the sense of being at ease amongst hundreds or even thousands of complete strangers, of being accepted and accepting others for who they are and not judging others or being judged by others. The discourses of open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance are widely upheld within many dance subcultures, although the extent to which they are embraced is debatable. Whilst many of my interviewees considered themselves to possess these traits, many exclusively participated in one scene and eschewed others as culturally and aesthetically inferior. This was a particularly common phenomenon within Internet communities centred on one genre-based scene, with many displaying contempt for participants in other scenes, particularly those deemed more commercial and less authentic. However, these views were not necessarily typical of all participants, as many actively embraced open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance, participating in a variety of dance scenes.

Such discourses of acceptance and belonging are also confirmed by the shared tastes of people within dancing crowds. To be dancing to the same music in the same location demonstrates a shared cultural knowledge and a shared understanding and appreciation of that knowledge. Such shared attributes play a central role in the feeling of acceptance and belonging often associated with club culture. Therefore, the more subversive or unusual the activity and the more cultural knowledge required to access and participate in it, the greater the link and commonality between its participants. Being part of a niche cultural activity, where the access to knowledge is also privileged and specialised therefore creates a sense of acceptance and belonging quite different to many other social situations clubbers encounter. There is the sense that these are places of shared tastes and shared knowledge which have attracted individuals and provided them with the necessary cultural knowledge and capital to negotiate entry. This extended narrative of Robin Hood is worth quoting at length. After a long pause, he says this of the feelings he experienced at a festival type event:

um [long pause] I ... definitely experienced what I set out to experience, which was ... to dance as myself, and ... and to mix with like people, to be in a place and be able to look around and see thousands and thousands and thousands of people in all directions that ... just that streak of enjoyment ... That streak of ... enjoying themselves even though, sometimes, maybe straighter society would, would ... shun that. In, in a 14 hour straight dance, straight event is, you know, it's a long haul and so, just that, just that freedom almost, that ... appreciation of self and, and the moment of dancing and just remembering that energy ... of ... freedom, if you like, of that freedom to choose what

you're experiencing. Um ... yeah so I definitely went away and came back feeling ... not too alone in this society (laughs).

This extended quote reveals participants' concerns over acceptance and belonging and the alternative value systems that many participants associate with dance events. This participant set out to experience being himself. His comment 'to dance as myself' suggests the naturalness of his dancing, being at ease with the surroundings and being true to himself. There was no need for conformity or concern for others' opinions. The simultaneous awareness of self without consciousness of self enables dancers to focus on enjoyment and being in the moment. Such comments about mixing with like-minded people also demonstrate how participants gain a sense of belonging through participation in dance culture. He mentioned the sense of being shunned by straight society but being accepted amongst other clubbers. This quote is also illustrative of the sense of comfort that many people experience through participating in dance events. It stresses the sense of differentiation many people see between themselves as participants in dance culture and wider society.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed and illustrated how dance music environments, such as clubs and festivals, constitute sites for experimentation with alternative identities, places where identity is carefully constructed through dress and behaviour to facilitate alternative role performances. The alternative identity performances permitted by dance music spaces provide a release from the day-to-day lives of participants, enabling them to dress and act differently whilst facilitating social acceptance, credibility and authenticity within given contexts (stages). Dance environments facilitate the visual and physical expression of roles which are incompatible with other social contexts due to their alternative performance boundaries. However, it is only through understanding the performance and role etiquette surrounding dance cultures and individual club events that participants are able to fully utilise and benefit from the potential freedoms of role performances facilitated by different environments, through selecting the stages appropriate to their character or selecting the character appropriate to the stages on which they wish to audition and become established actors.

Methods of visual presentation are a key means of expressing and constructing identity, as they are predominantly the most immediate and obvious distinguishing factors used by individuals to judge and assess others in terms of who they are and how they perceive themselves. The clothes worn by individuals are their shell and armour to the outside world, but more significantly they reveal much about the role they are adopting and the identity they are portraying at any given time to the other actors present and the directors of event experiences, as witnessed at a range of events. Role adoption is therefore neither entirely autonomous nor objective, it is subjective and contextually based, 'the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by others present' (Goffman, 1969, p. ix). Therefore, although many individuals perceive themselves as autonomous individuals, their perception of complete autonomy is an ideological myth, due to the levels of influence of the legitimate speakers within their relative social spheres. It is the interplay between the notions of individual autonomy and the ability to choose from the range of aesthetic options available that provides many participants with a sense of self-identity and group identification within dance culture. However, this all takes place not in a vacuum, but within an environment shaped and influenced by peer groups, other actors present, artists, DJs, promoters and the media – both within dance culture and wider society. The processes of identity development and presentation are conducted through negotiating an authentic and legitimate character within the contextual and logistical constraints of individual bodies and the sociocultural forces acting upon them.

The interpretation of and response to presentations of self through role performance and adoption, it must be noted, are also highly subjective, as indicated by the tenets of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and evidenced by the different approaches to role performance witnessed at these events and participants' responses to others from within and outside their own cultural groups. 'From a symbolic interactionist perspective, successful communication is not guaranteed but depends on how clearly a message is sent and how accurately those receiving it identify, interpret and negotiate the intended symbolic meanings' (Winge, 2003, p. 124). It is the

location of individual signs within wider collages of signs and their contextual situation that create, convey and sustain meanings and portrayals of individual identity, as signs are embodied with varying meaning, significance, cultural relevance and worth depending on their placement within wider codes of understanding and perception (Hall, 1997).

Through adopting an ethnographic research approach and incorporating online resources, this paper has sought to provide another dimension to our understanding of contemporary dance culture and incorporate an additional element to the ethnographic toolkit. It has synthesised findings relating to identity and participation in contemporary dance music culture and in doing so it has sought to contribute to the academic body of knowledge relating to embodiment, fashion and identity performance in the context of contemporary dance culture, youth cultures, leisure and event studies. In terms of motivations for event attendance and participation, this work adds to our understanding of why people attend certain events and raises a number of pertinent issues regarding the interrelationship between event attendance and identity. The paper has also revealed how people seek to develop and perform multiple identities within contemporary society and how dance music spaces, with their unique qualities and attributes, constitute ideal places for alternative identity performances.

Through utilising the performance metaphor, we have examined here how dance events are actively constructed as stages for the performance of alternative identities. The paper has illustrated how the promotion and enforcement of different clothing styles acts as a final filter in the selection of clubbing crowds and facilitate senses of exclusion, acceptance and belonging within specific event spaces. Furthermore, it has considered how dress influences the reception people receive and the roles they are able to legitimately perform in dance music events and how other actors present upon these stages provide a feedback mechanism for the ongoing development and performance of participant identities. In the context of dance events, identity performance is also interlinked with awareness of subcultural knowledge and prevailing discourses within particular scenes, for what may be acceptable performances at some events, are not at others. Finally, this research also demonstrates how dance cultures interconnect with other youth cultures in terms of propensity for different fashion styles, which relate to and espouse similar ideological discourses surrounding distance for the 'mainstream', accessibility and exclusivity. It opens up avenues for further research in terms of exploring the role of the media in the development and performance of participant identities and the application of the performance metaphor to other types of event spaces.

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