

THE CULTURAL ROLE OF STIGMATIZED YOUTH GROUPS: The Case of the Partille Johnnys of Sweden

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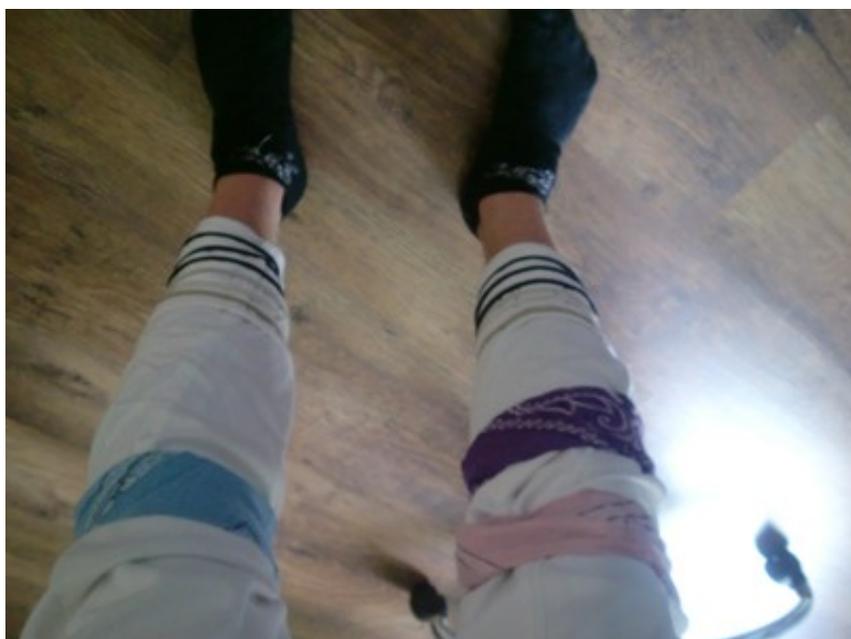
One of the most frequently reproduced images of the PJs online. Image borrowed from <http://bloggfrossa.blogspot.com/2009/04/partille-johnny.html>.

Recent theoretical accounts of youth cultures have conceptualized youth as a global ideology that takes on specific forms in different local contexts following the logic of glocalization (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006). As such, there appears to be a number of more or less stable stylistic expressions that belong to a virtual canon of “classic” and thereby “authentic” youth subcultures (Kjeldgaard 2009). The origins of these youth subcultures are conceptualized as distant in either space or time from the everyday lives of most teenagers across the globe, especially those living in places experienced as peripheral. Nevertheless, appropriating the stylistic expressions of these “classic” youth subcultures – by mimicking or by reconfiguring – in ways that are experienced as authentic seems to be part and parcel of what it means to be a teenager today.

We have been interested in analyzing the stylistic expressions of one particular youth group – the so-called Partille Johnnys (PJs) of Sweden – that breaks with this convention of how to relate to the globally available canon of culturally sanctioned styles. This transgression of the codes of “normal” youth behavior places them in a position as stigmatized and they seem to serve an important

cultural role in the Swedish youth landscape as the Other from which other youth groups, particularly those self-identifying as mainstream, can distance themselves. We thus wish to add to discussions of identity construction by discussing an aspect of identity-not (cf. Freitas, Kaiser, Chandler, Hall, Kim, Hammidi 1997), i.e. how identity is largely formed by delimitations of what one does not identify with. Furthermore, we are interested in the discussion of consumer stigma, in which Sandikci and Ger (2010) recently asked the question of why some consumers chose to engage in consumption practices that are stigmatized. At this point we have not sought to answer the question of why consumers or consumer groups engage in stigmatized practices, rather we have wished to further the understanding of how stigma gets orchestrated in consumer culture and what cultural role stigmatized groups might play.

INTRODUCING PARTILLE JOHNNY



The characteristic hair ribbons worn on top of the jeans, here combined with some colorful bandanas tied around the legs. Image borrowed from <http://partillejohnnyfalun.blogg.se/>. We have been interested in firstly describing what constitutes the PJ style, and secondly looking at different ways in which those youth not identifying with the PJ style react too it and voice their opinions online. The PJs made their way onto the youth cultural map around 2006 or somewhat earlier, but now appears to be in decline. The most salient elements of the PJ style include designer jeans styled with hair ribbons or elastic bands worn on top of the jeans below the knee down to the ankle, as well as generous use of hair wax and tanning products. Although this is the PJs foremost trademark, it is rather the combination of a number of themes rather than one particular element that makes up the style. Based on the vast amounts of pictures and videos in which the PJs figure online, as well as comments and discussions on what characterize the style the following have been made out as some recurrent stylistic elements.

- A preference for designer jeans from the Japanese brand Evisu, alternatively from Dutch G-star (the 96 model), Italian Replay or equivalent label. The preferred models from Evisu and G-star are baggy and carry big prints on the back and side of the jeans. Chinos can replace the designer jeans. Apart from the emphasis put on the pants there is a general favor for designer clothes.
 - The use of hair ribbons or elastic bands worn on top of the jeans below the knee down to the ankle. Typically between 3-20 on each leg, gladly worn in all the colors of the rainbow. The use of the elastic bands creates the effect of skinny jeans on the legs, while remaining baggy over the bottom.
 - A generous use of hair wax from d:fi or daxvax. One popular hairstyle is to bleach the hair and style it into spikes, so called igelkottsfrisyr (hedgehog hairstyle). The elaborate and many times lengthy styling routines of the hair often demands the use of a blow dryer or flat iron to get the desired result.
 - A fondness for make-up that is typically connected to femininity in a Swedish context. This includes a preference for particular make up such as tanning products, foundation and lip-gloss. The ideal look is a tanned face combined with a lip-gloss from the brand Idomin on the lips, a white crème used to treat dry skin that does not blend with the skin but remains as a white or slightly purplish coat where applied. Although a central characteristic, not all PJ's use make up everyday and some prefer not to use cosmetics on their face at all.
 - The use of white tube socks from the brand Intersport, or another equivalent sports chain that displays their logos on the socks.
 - A bandanna worn around the head, alternatively around the leg.
 - White sneakers or loafers.
 - Fake diamond earring from the brand DC, or a so-called Thailand necklace, a white shell necklace typically purchased while on charter holiday in Thailand.
 - A gym bag worn on the back with a floorball stick prominently featured.
- Similar to what Ostberg describes concerning the Swedish Brat enclave (i.e. young men and women stereotypically described as spoiled youngsters and prone to conspicuous consumption, see Ostberg 2007:103), the PJs are not opposing the market with their style but are on the contrary dependent on the market for their existence (Ostberg 2007:101). In opposition to the Brats the general rule of trying to look the part without making an effort does not apply (Ostberg 2007:102). Rather, the style is based on typical features found in the mainstream such as denim jeans and designer clothing, but highly exaggerated and subject to excessive styling.



Young man showing off the so called igelkottsfrisyr (hedgehog hairstyle). Image borrowed from <http://partillejohnnyfalun.blogg.se/>.

REACTIONS TO PARTILLE JOHNNY

The style has attracted quite a bit of attention from those not practicing it themselves. The reactions from the outsiders are not neutral, rather people describe that they find the style so unattractive and annoying that they give voice to heated feelings of hating and despising it. This can be paralleled to Ege's study of the popularity of wearing so-called carrot-cut jeans among working-class male in Berlin (Ege 2010). Ege shows how those not part of the group give heated responses and judgments and connects this to embarrassment (Ege 2010: 159 - 160). Similar reactions are plentiful when looking at online discussion forums or comments sections to videos or personal blogs. Derogatory terms are frequently used by youth who wish to distance themselves from this style, typically describing the adoption of the style as an epidemic spreading across the country that has to be exterminated. Here lies one of the most interesting aspects of the phenomenon, namely how the mainstream safeguards what is considered not only as normal or deviant, but also as good and bad taste. Middle-class notions and practices of modernity, class, gender, individuality and fashion come into question here. In this sense the PJ style proves as a good mirror for reflecting on transgressions of what is considered to be normal in terms of style and bodily practices for contemporary Swedish youth.

THE CULTURAL ROLE OF STIGMATIZED GROUPS

The PJs can be said to constitute an ephemeral group in the Swedish youth landscape and they are likely to be forgotten in the not too distant future. Nevertheless, there are some features of their presence that might help to understand the dynamics of contemporary consumer culture. Firstly, we would like to address the question of why this group has managed to garner so much hatred from the outside. We suggest that this group has, through their stylistic expressions, violated symbolic taboos and that these transgressions of socially sanctioned cultural boundaries is what

triggers the strong reactions (cf. Douglas 1991). Contemporary youth subcultures are characterized by a number of center-periphery relationships in which the groups who experience that they belong to the periphery tend to view the subcultural expressions emanating in the center as authentic. There is thus a place element to experiences of authenticity. Our material confirms earlier findings in studies of youth culture and style, namely that there is a high awareness and reflexivity among youth about the structural relationships between different styles and what styles are acceptable to adopt (Kjeldgaard 2009:80). The reaction of strong suspicion and ridicule towards the PJ style among peers bears testimony to the sensitive relationship between global diffusion of styles and appropriations in local contexts.

Furthermore, youth subcultures belonging to another era might be experienced as more authentic, thus suggesting also a temporal element to the idea of authenticity in relationship to youth subcultures. For those in peripheral locations, orchestrating an authentic subcultural expression largely has to do with translating or adopting these “authentic” subcultures in a correct way. Certain styles – such as punks, heavy metal rockers, and goths – have become “classics” among youth, and reference to these functions to signal good taste and a high cultural knowledge (Kjeldgaard 2009:78). We suggest that the cultural function of the stigmatized group PJ is to serve as a reminder of what the mainstream is not. The PJs serve this important function, and are thus made important, not because they are radically different than the mainstream even though the onlookers try to make them that, but because they are indeed quite similar.

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