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Consumption, drugs and style: Constructing intra-ethnic boundaries in Asian American youth cultures

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Abstract

Based on 250 qualitative interviews with Asian American young men and women in the dance/club scenes in the San Francisco area, we examine the interplay between consumption, style and taste cultures with issues of ethnic identity, gender and acculturation. We explore the ways that consumption and taste markers (e.g. fashion, cars, music and drugs) are used to establish or negotiate symbolic boundaries between groups in this youth culture. The picture they paint of the dance scene is one less about cohesiveness and unity and more about divisions and boundaries, not only between but also significantly within ethnic groupings. The choice of drugs and ways of exhibiting intoxication are among the types of consumption that the young people drew upon to mark symbolic boundaries and establish identities. The young men and women in this study discuss a number of key boundaries in the scene, e.g. between FOBs and twinkies, between pretty boys and thugs, as they attempt to establish the cultural legitimacy of their own styles of Asian American identities.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural researchers have emphasized the importance of commodity consumption – whether it be of music, cars, clothes, food or drugs – in the construction of identities and lifestyles (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; McKay, 1997; Miller, 1995), particularly within youth cultures (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Hebdige, 1979; Miles, 2000). Cultural consumption can also be a factor in demarcating and constituting social group boundaries (Eckert, 1989; Frost, 2003; Miles, 2002). Rave and club cultures have proven fertile ground for exploring these issues (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Hutton, 2006; Malbon, 1999; Perrone, 2009; Pini, 1997; Rief, 2009; Thornton, 1996). This article examines the interplay of consumption, taste and style with ethnicity, acculturation and authenticity in the narratives of Asian American young men and women in the dance club and rave scenes in San Francisco, and the stories they tell about intra-ethnic boundaries in this youth culture.

Although there is a significant body of the literature on consumption and contemporary culture, drug consumption has not typically been a significant focus of this research agenda. Drug scholarship, too often, remains significantly distanced from potentially complementary social science and cultural studies scholarship. We seek to understand illicit drugs and alcohol not as ‘essentialized substances’ (McDonald, 1994), entailing a unique, separate type of consumption. Instead, we see the consumption of drugs and alcohol as interrelated with and embedded in a range of types of consumption that are central to identity construction and social life today (Hunt & Barker, 2001; Hunt, Moloney, & Fazio, 2011b). This means, for instance, that it is not only identities (including ethnic identities) that shape

drug and alcohol consumption patterns, but social and cultural practices of drug and alcohol consumption may play a role in the construction of identities and group boundaries (Hunt, Moloney, & Evans, 2011a; Moloney, Hunt, & Evans, 2008). To fully understand drug and alcohol consumption, it is important to understand contexts of consumption, relationships to other forms of consumption, and the ways consumption is embedded in constructions of self and identity, including ethnic, gender and sexual identities (Bauermeister, 2007; Ettore, 2007; Milhet, Moloney, Bergeron, & Hunt, 2011; Mitchell, Bunton, & Green, 2004; Reith, 2004; Rief, 2009; Soller & Lee, 2010). Hence, in this article, we will examine the ways in which young people draw on drug consumption, as well as fashion, style and taste, in the construction of their identities, and in marking symbolic boundaries and membership in in-groups and out-groups.

Consumption, its pleasures, and the fluidity of identities have been major themes in scholarship on youth nightlife scenes, particularly work associated with a 'post-subcultural' position (Muggleton & Weinzerl, 2003).¹ For example, Malbon (1999) analysed the 'night out' at raves and clubs, from the perspective of young attendees, focusing on the experiential and emotional aspects of clubbing, feelings of communality and effervescence on the dance floor. Malbon (1999, p. 50) highlights collective identification at the dance club, arguing that 'in these situations, notions that are central to our personal biographies' such as gender, ethnicity or class, 'can become temporarily eclipsed by what it is that we share with those with whom we are co-present'. Similar arguments are found in the work on 'neotribes' (Bennett, 1999; Maffesoli, 1996; Muggleton, 2000). Maffesoli (1996) argued that traditional structures of race, class, gender or religion no longer primarily determine group identities; instead, neo-tribes are new types of socialities, often organized around consumption, shared lifestyles and aesthetic ethics that encourage fluid, plural, temporary identities that individuals flow between and among (Riley, Griffin, & Morey, 2010).

Inequality and stratification have not been emphasized in much of the 'post-subcultural studies' work, in part as a reaction against an over-privileging of class issues in early youth subcultures work associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Yet, in recent years, the pendulum has perhaps swung too far in the other direction, with class, ethnicity or gender absent from too much of the rave/club cultures work (Alexander, 2000; MacDonald & Shildrick, 2007). When theorists of neo-tribes dismiss the importance of deterministic, structural categories such as race, class or gender in group identity formation among today's youth, they are not fully engaging with the more nuanced understandings of ethnicity or gender in contemporary sociology and ethnic studies, which themselves emphasize the fluid and transitory nature of identities (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Espiritu, 1992; Hall, 1992; Nagel, 1994; Okamura, 1981; Omi & Winant, 1994; Song, 2003; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Key works on Asian American youth have contributed to a more complex understanding of racial and ethnic identities, social group boundaries, cultural negotiations and the intertwining of issues of gender, class and immigration generation with ethnic identities (Danico, 2004; Kibria, 2002; Lee & Zhou, 2004; Maira, 2000, 2002; Maira & Soep, 2004; Min, 2002; Shankar, 2008a). Recent scholarship on the 'nighttime economy' has attempted to bring class, stratification and (to a lesser extent) race/ethnicity back into the analysis (Hadfield, 2006; Hayward & Hobbs, 2007; Talbot, 2007). As Chatterton and Hollands (2003, pp. 108–109) argue:

while we need to see mainstream nightlife as 'fluid', it is equally important not to collapse all youth groups into a 'postmodern maelstrom' where cultural boundaries are blurred, or ignore the impact of social structures and consumption divisions ...

¹The specific pleasures of drug consumption, however, have been somewhat under-analysed in these literatures (Hunt et al., 2009).

Class and gender remain central ... with sexual identity and 'race' or ethnicity also playing a part in creating distinctions within nightlife groupings.

The night-time economy literature, however, typically focuses on these topics at the level of political economy and regulation, and less so at the level of subjective experiences, of consumption, or constructions of ethnic identity and symbolic boundaries, which will be the focus of this article. In addition, Asian American youth have been largely missing from both strands of the club cultures/nightlife literatures (although see Alsaybar, 2002; Maira, 2000, 2002; Maira & Soep, 2004; Murthy, 2007; Namkung, 2004; Sharma, Hutnyk, & Sharma, 1996).

While the young people we interviewed did evoke images of fluid identities, multiple affiliations and movement between networks and taste cultures, the picture they present of the dance scene is not one of unity but of fragmentation. As we will show, gender, ethnicity and social class have not been elided or eclipsed; rather, these are crucial for understanding the very taste cultures, fluidity and movement that comprise this youth culture. The narratives about the dance scene and drug use that emerged in our interviews focus on racial and ethnic authenticity, on constructions of ethnic identity and on symbolic boundaries between groups and merge issues of style, consumption, class, ethnicity and gender. The styles they wear, the music they listen to and drugs they consume are all a part of the narratives they tell about ethnicity, identity and symbolic boundaries. In this article, we will examine the importance of consumption (including drug consumption) and style in the construction of identities, social groups and symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) among young Asian Americans in the dance club and rave scenes in the San Francisco Bay area.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The data and analysis for this article is taken from a broader research project on Asian Americans, club drugs and the dance/club scenes in San Francisco. This project grew out of our previous research on ecstasy and the rave scene (Hunt, Moloney, & Evans, 2009). Although popular accounts of the rave scene and related youth cultures often depict this as a primarily or exclusively white youth culture, in San Francisco we discovered that Asian American youth comprise a significant and diverse segment of the rave and dance club scenes. Thus the follow-up project, of which this article is a part, was designed to examine the experiences of these young people. We were interested in exploring connections between identity, including ethnic identity, social context and drug consumption.

Between 2005 and 2007, we conducted 250 in-depth interviews with young Asian Americans, ages 14–35, who consume 'club drugs' and attended dance clubs and raves in the San Francisco area. Some were involved in 'the Asian scene' – dance clubs explicitly oriented towards Asian American youth. Others preferred mixed-ethnicity dance clubs or raves. These ranged from large-scale raves, to small lounges, warehouse parties, multi-room dance clubs and varied in demographic makeup, attire and music. These venues were important sites for many of the young people's leisure, social and romantic lives. Drug use was an inclusion criteria for the interviews, with marijuana being the most common illicit drug used (98% lifetime use), followed by ecstasy (95%), psychedelic mushrooms (64%) and cocaine (50%).² There was a wide range of frequency and intensity of drug consumption, from those who had tried only a few drugs and used them infrequently, to those who were heavy or daily users of various substances. The most common pattern was

²See Fazio, Joe-Laidler, Moloney, and Hunt (2010) for a detailed analysis of drug use patterns in this sample.

consumption of a variety of drugs recreationally, primarily confined to specific times or settings, specifically raves, dance clubs or parties, generally on the weekend.

We utilized a targeted sampling approach (Bluthenthal & Watters, 1995; Peterson et al., 2008) recruiting participants through advertisements, direct contact at clubs and raves and chain referrals from previous respondents.³ Although this sample is not representative of all Asian American youth, we were able to interview a heterogeneous group of young people with diversity in terms of age, gender, class, sexual identity and ethnicity (Table I).

The mixed-methods interviews comprised a quantitative portion that collected demographic and drug use data as well as a lengthy semi-structured qualitative interview schedule, which focused on ethnic identity, drug consumption and participation in the dance scenes. The interviews were audio-recorded and the qualitative portions transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted by young adult interviewers (in their early/mid-20 s), many (but not all) of whom were themselves Asian American. Many of the interviewers/ fieldworkers had personal experiences and contacts in local dance/club scenes, which was helpful both for recruiting participants and establishing rapport with respondents. The interviews were conducted in a variety of locations – our field offices, local cafes, respondents' homes – and were detailed and somewhat lengthy, taking 3–4 h to complete. Respondents were given a US\$65 honorarium for participating. All procedures were approved by our institutional review board.

We used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to aid in organizing and coding the interviews in terms of primary themes that emerged from the interviews. Coding and analysis is an iterative process that entails reading and rereading the interview transcripts to produce successively more abstract and refined ideas about themes and domains of interest (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1994). One key aspect of this is to identify and analyse interpretive repertoires, or recurring ways of talking about topics, that are used by respondents (Bogren, 2010; Fairclough, 2010; Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

CONSUMPTION, STYLE AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES IN THE ASIAN CLUB SCENE

Throughout the interviews a key component of the participants' narratives centred on what set them and their friends apart from other groups of Asian Americans and the boundaries they drew to mark these differences. Participants discussed fine levels of distinctions, different ways of being Asian American or different cultural scripts within the dance scenes; how to display and perform one's subcultural affiliations; how to dress like a gangster or 'Hong Kong girl' or 'hipster'; which drugs to use and how to display one's intoxication, how to avoid being perceived as 'fresh off the boat' or a 'pretty boy'. These symbolic boundaries are intertwined with issues of social class, foreignness, authenticity and the accomplishment of gender. Through the prisms of style, taste and consumption, these young Asian Americans construct and contest different Asian American personas and masculinities and femininities.

'I just don't like FOBs'

When participants discussed style, consumption or taste cultures in the Asian dance scenes, immigration generation, foreignness and acculturation were often central issues. Many second- and third-generation Asian Americans expressed a desire to neither appear like nor associate with 'FOBs'. This acronym for 'fresh off the boat' is a derogatory term used by

³For a more detailed discussion of sampling and methods in this project, see Moloney et al. (2008).

many respondents to refer to newly immigrant Asian Americans, whom they deem hopelessly unaccultu-rated and uncool.

The 'FOB' label has been the subject of a few previous studies of Asian American youth. Shankar (2008a, 2008b) examined the question of 'FOBs' from a linguistic perspective, attending to the meaning of the style of speech labelled 'fobby' by South Asian teens in the San Jose area. She found that this label 'FOB' was not specific to new immigrants, but was highly connected to social class; those accused of being 'fobby' were typically middle-class Sikhs whose clothes, hair and language styles were deemed unstylish and backwards by the dominant upper-middle-class Indian groups in the school. Pyke and Dang (2003) found that 'FOB' and 'whitewashed' were polar categories that young Korean and Vietnamese Americans deployed to categorize co-ethnic peers as different from them, as these young Asian Americans aspired to an ambiguous and undefined 'bicultural middle'.

Among the young Asian Americans in our study, the boundary of FOB versus non-FOB was a crucial one. 'FOB' served as a repository for a number of negative stereotypes about Asian immigrants and is a figure in opposition to which many young Asian Americans define and describe themselves. The accusation of being a 'FOB' was levelled by a number of competing groups. Some young Cambodian and Laotian respondents complain of 'fobby Hong Kongers'. But at the same time, some Chinese American respondents described 'thuggish' young Cambodians who speak non-standard English as FOBs. In both of those examples, not only ethnicity, but also class, were key dividing factors as well, with most of the Cambodian respondents coming from a much more marginalized economic background. Most commonly, though, the discussions of FOBs focused on the respondents' co-ethnics – Chinese Americans describing other Chinese Americans, Indian Americans describing Indian Americans.

Many were quite explicit about their dislike of FOBs. Janav (Indian, 28) said he does not associate with FOBs. 'I actually kind laugh at 'em. I think it's funny... because they're so different... they stick out like sore thumbs'. Language was one of the key features listed by many respondents discussion FOBs. When asked to describe a FOB, he responded in a fake Indian accent: 'FOB is somebody who is learning how to be an engineer and talking funny, and not eating meat because they're veggie. And they, they talk funny'. Issues of gender and sexuality arose in other discussion of FOBs, who are associated with strict or 'traditional' gender expectations. Ojal (Indian, 27) provided a long list of things that make someone a FOB:

It's not just the way you carry yourself or what you wear, how you put your hair, how you smell like Indian curry, how you have an accent, but it's also your mentality. Like ... a FOB guy will date like a girl from America that's ... Indian origin and he'll be like, 'Oh, you need to tie your hair back. Don't wear that low-cut thing in public'. To say all these rules to her ... like my parents are not as strict as this dude.

Language, style, food and gender practices are all said to create a deep chasm between American-born and 'FOB' Indians.

Even more than language or 'traditional' values, what loomed largest in the descriptions of FOBs – what made them an undesirable other – were fashion and appearance. FOBs displayed themselves in ways that indicated a different taste culture (Bourdieu, 1984), one which these other young Asian Americans wanted to distance themselves from. For example, Mimi (Chinese, 24) argued that though Chinese culture and 'Asianness' are important to her, and her friends are predominantly Asian American, she does not want to be confused with 'fobby' Asians who frequent many Asian-nights at clubs. She described them

as more ‘Chinesey’ or ‘Asiany’. They have a superficial look, dress up more, dance in particular ways and drive luxury cars. Brenda (Korean, 25)⁴ similarly argued that a distinguishing feature of FOBs was their hair and clothes:

Like the guys they always have long hair. They always have this one style of hair that I know is popular in, you know, whatever Asian country right now. Um, the girls always have like the same hairstyle, too ... they wear ugly things too ... just tacky ... Cause they’ll copy the styles, like in Asian countries, you know the Japanese start the style, the Koreans copy it ...

Part of what makes fobby styles undesirable, they imply, is the sense that the styles emanate from Asian countries, from Hong Kong magazines or from Japanese trendsetters. These young Asian Americans’ style, and narratives of style, works to ‘disidentify’ with foreignness and with foreign-born Asian Americans. Kibria (2002) identified this kind of disidentification, finding that even for second-generation Asian Americans, being seen as ‘American’ was always conditional, requiring constant work. Disidentifying with foreignness and first-generation Asian immigrants allowed them to provisionally shore up their American identities and deflect racist assumptions.

‘I’m no twinkie’

Young Asian Americans categorize not only first-generation immigrants in terms of style, but also second- and third-generation youth as well. Derek (Chinese/Vietnamese, 27) criticized those who he saw as having ‘lost’ their culture. He disdains the ‘ABCs’ (American-born Chinese) who do not speak Chinese for having ‘become white’ and assimilated into American culture. ‘They’re a sell-out. They’re a twinkie. They’re a banana’. These terms, which imply that someone is yellow on the outside, but white on the inside, arose in a number of interviews. Derek argued that these white-washed Asians can be spotted by their preppy clothes, their white girlfriends or their preference for certain cars.

Sonya (Chinese, 24), along with other youth, expressed concern about being called ‘whitewashed’ by other Chinese and Asian Americans, a label she disputes (though we also did encounter a few respondents who wore such labels with pride). She said the accusation is due to who she dates and how she dresses. ‘If you’re not that traditional Banana Republic Chinese American, then, and you like to wear, you know, more outspoken clothes, then you become more whitewashed or something’. Sonya expressed frustration with this label, pointing out that she can speak Mandarin and is a ‘prideful Chinese American’, saying that these things and ‘your culture and your values’ should determine whether one is whitewashed, not the sort of clothes one wears.

Musical taste was also a factor in assessing whether someone is whitewashed. Many participants described hip-hop as increasingly the music of the Asian American dance club scene (whereas previously electronic dance music had been more predominant). This shift to hip-hop was so dramatic that some young people who did not like hip-hop worried about accusations that they were not sufficiently Asian American or that they were whitewashed. Jia (Chinese, 26) commented that she generally felt uncomfortable at many Asian clubs because of her preference for rock music over hip-hop. ‘Like one of those Asian clubs where there’s like hip-hop and stuff... and then I go in, I’m like this rocker chick, and then it’s like I feel like awkward... cuz they’ll call me like I’m the whitey or something or twinkie’. Preferring rock over hip-hop music indicated that she acted white and undermined her Asian American authenticity.

⁴While most respondents who spoke critically about FOBs were second or third-generation Americans, Brenda was first-generation (or 1.5 generation), having immigrated during elementary school.

Establishing oneself amidst the symbolic boundaries and hierarchies of these dance scenes, then, is not simply about asserting or establishing one's Americanness and disidentifying from foreignness. Rather, it involves demonstrating an appropriate balance between Asian and American – not being too foreign yet not having lost one's Asian culture and become too white either. Janav, who laughed at FOBs for talking funny and for embodying stereotypes like studying engineering, asserted that he was in the middle between these groups (Pyke & Dang, 2003). 'I think I'm more in the middle. Um, I'm definitely not a FOB. But I am definitely a little bit more in touch with my culture or my heritage than some of the kids I see nowadays'.

Style, clothing and appearance as key dimensions of othering

The degree to which the consumption or display of a particular car, music, drug or clothing brand can serve to undermine or enhance one's 'Asianness' highlights the fluidity and provisionality of ethnic identity. The management of bodily appearance – 'all those features of the surface of the body, including modes of dress and adornment, which are visible to the individual and to other agents, and which are ordinarily used as clues to interpret actions' – is a crucial aspect of the construction of self-identity (Giddens, 1991, p. 99). Stylistic markers of consumption were frequently described by the participants as evidence of particular modes of Asian American identity and expression. They were treated as the visible index of coolness, Asian authenticity, Americanness and ethnicity – in other words, the type of person and type of Asian American, that one is.

Fashion and style appears to contribute to group cohesion and reinforce or represent symbolic boundaries among the young Asian Americans in the dance scenes. Unlike the punks, mods and teddy boys in Hebdige's (1979) classic work, or the Goths, wannabes and campus Christians studied by Wilkins (2008), whose clothing and style were actively chosen to set themselves apart from the dominant society or mainstream, many of the young Asian Americans in this study did not present or describe themselves as having a distinctly different style that sets them apart. Instead, they focused in their narratives in the styles of *others*. While many were able to articulate clearly and critique the styles of FOBs, they were more vague about their own style or that of their friends.⁵

The specific styles associated by some respondents as indicative of being fobby or whitewashed varied (one respondent claimed that FOBs drive Hondas and Toyotas whereas another said that Americanized Asians drive these cars whereas FOBs drive luxury cars); what is more important is the role that the clothes and other visible objects of consumption played to help demarcate boundaries between social groups. Take the example of Sonya, discussed above, who was called whitewashed for having a different style than 'traditional Chinese Americans'. 'Traditional Chinese Americans' in her account were also called 'Banana Republic Chinese Americans', referring to the retail clothing store Banana Republic, the slightly higher-end line of the GAP company, which is itself associated with classically, stereotypically, American styles of clothes. Similarly, Megan talked about having highlighted hair (which to an outsider might seem evidence of conforming to a western beauty ideal) as easy, quick evidence that someone is a Hong Kong girl, or FOB. Questions of authenticity, as they emerged in the respondents' discussions about FOBs, whitewash, and other indications of stylistic boundaries and taste cultures, almost never had anything remotely to do with 'traditional' ethnic clothing as one might typically think of it, nor were there many discussions of the types of 'hybrid' styles (combining Indian cultural elements with American/hip-hop styles) that Maira (2002) found in her study of the desi

⁵This mirrors the relationship that many clubbers in Thornton's (1996) classic study had with the 'mainstream'. While the mainstream versus hip hierarchy identified by Thornton is not the one that is at work in the criticisms of FOBs (who might not typically be described as 'mainstream'), there is the similar process of a very clear other versus an undefined in-group.

scene. Instead, there were various positioning around the possible authenticity of an American Asian style.

Consumption, appearance and gender

Constructions of femininities and masculinities were also important in many of the intra-ethnic symbolic boundaries drawn among Asian Americans in the dance scenes. Standards of appearance and style are key dimensions through which gender is accomplished or against which one is held accountable, for both young men and young women (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Chapkis, 1986; Frost, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Frost (2005) draws on Goffman's (1979) work on gender display to argue that 'doing appearance' (McRobbie, 1991) is integral to the production of gendered social identity – that appearance, style and dress are not merely surface reflections of gender identity, but constitutive of gendered subjectivity. Thus the critiques of style above are not just about ethnicity or acculturation, but also fundamentally about gender – about appropriate ways of accomplishing Asian American femininities or masculinities. The 'doing' of gender, and of appearance, is fundamentally bound up with the doing of race, ethnicity, class and sexuality (Bettie, 2000; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). At stake in the symbolic boundaries drawn between different styles and groups in the dance scenes are not only different modes of being Asian American, but specifically, different modes of being an Asian American young woman or man.

The criticisms of the attire and styles of FOBs were largely about preferred and disliked forms of femininities in the dance scenes. Critiques of the long black hair, the blonde highlights, the Hong Kong fashions, are critiques of particular feminine styles. The appearance-based hierarchies of femininity in the club scene were profoundly alienating for some of the young Asian American women in the study.⁶ A number of young women described a narrowness in the Asian club scene, highlighting limited acceptable options regarding appearance and feminine display.⁷ Tessa (Chinese/Vietnamese, 23) said she avoids Asian clubs because she is 'not up to their standards' of appearance and dress. 'Like, I don't look a certain way they want Asian girls to look... the weight. Just my whole image... like my lips, my skin, my arms, my thighs'; and that she gets asked to 'dance more in like a mixed crowd than a all-Asian crowd'.

All the girls are like, stick thin and 18 to 20... and then it just like really strikes a nerve with a part of my culture that I like kind of don't live according to, that I got whitewashed from or whatever ... Just like the very clear idea of what femininity is. Like everybody has long, straight hair and big earrings and tight clothes on, and everyone's wearing black ... and then they're all very, like, materially ambitious.

Not meeting these standards of feminine appearance called into question not only her gender accomplishment, but also her ethnic authenticity, leading again to the idea of being whitewashed. Other young women pointed to how the culture of style and strictures of femininity within the Asian club scene affects their ability to connect with other women in the scene, highlighting the significance of gendered symbolic boundaries and hierarchies not only between men and women but also among young women (Bettie, 2003):

I guess maybe I don't particularly like to go to these clubs because I don't, I don't dress that way, and I don't feel like I really fit into that type of crowd. Or the conversations that we're having ... I don't necessarily wear like a lotta makeup.

⁶The difficulties of meeting the expectations and demands of appearance-based hierarchies in the club scenes was also a theme in a number of interviews with gay and bisexual men regarding the gay club scene.

⁷This issue is obviously not limited to the Asian club scene, although some participants believed appearance standards are more relaxed in the multi-racial dance scenes, while others attributed this to a problem with commercial clubs (versus underground scenes or raves) more generally.

Like I don't wear like a lotta foundation or like, I just don't like to look plastic, you know. (Lin, Chinese, 25)

'Hyphy Asians' and thugs: style, class, masculinities and authenticity

Style is not simply an issue for fashioning feminine identities, however. Competing constructions of Asian American masculinities in the interviews were also intertwined with issues of style, consumption and taste cultures. For example, Nelson (Laotian, 16) drew on issues of style to mark the boundaries between his group of predominantly Cambodian friends versus 'typical' Asian Americans (especially Chinese and Vietnamese) at Asian clubs. He said, he and his friends felt out of place at an Asian club they attended, saying it was filled with 'like the pretty boy Asians. Asians you could get over. Like the Asians that would be scared of you'. He said pretty boys 'like to be pretty all the time... they'll be doing some female stuff, like, I don't know, just putting gel on or something or just trying to fix it up real nice or something'. He described, somewhat disdainfully, the clothes typically worn at an Asian American dance club: 'Old Navy and all that. I don't know, just like ... the expensive clothes, like American Eagle and stuff'. He contrasts this with the style of dress favoured by his friends. 'We were wearing like regular white Ts, like fresh white T's and stuff. And just Nike and Jordans'. Social class markers (expensive clothes versus basic white t-shirts), masculinity and ethnicity are intertwined here. With the label of 'pretty boy' Asians, Nelson echoes one dominant stereotype of Asian American masculinity which is that of the emasculated, effeminate Asian man (Chua & Fujino, 1999). He contrasts this with the masculine display of his own group, which evokes images of toughness and intimidation and street authenticity, with the ability to 'get over on' those other Asians and scare them.

In another example, Tommy (Cambodian, 16) distinguished himself and his social group from many other Asian American groups he encounters in the dance scene, whom he criticizes for 'trying too hard' or being 'wannabes' – including many Chinese, Filipino and Indian Americans.⁸ He explained that at parties and clubs most people drink alcohol and smoke marijuana, except for 'square' Asians (as opposed to cool Asians) who do not consume drugs and who do not know how to dance. He further elaborated that 'square Asians' (whom he also referred to as 'Chinamens') wear tight jeans, Payless-brand shoes and 'big ass' backpacks. Again, markers of ethnicity and nationality, social class, differing masculinities and consumption (from clothes to drugs), intermingle within this narrative, in distinguishing the square Asians from his group. Substance use and clothing style were both important indicators of one's cool versus square status. Tommy continued with his discussion of square Asians noting 'Squares are people who are faking it and aren't really 'hood. They were geeky or nerdy folks'; he explained that 'squares' would be a Vietnamese family doing homework versus what the respondent was doing, which was playing football and becoming 'hood'. He says he grew up in the streets and 'hood life', and highlighted the importance of African American culture among his friends. Issues of authenticity loomed large in these discussions – being a wannabe, fake, are condemned and characteristics of the 'other'. The authenticity that was discussed here was not focused on one's relationship to one's Asian culture or heritage, as it was in some other interviews, rather the authenticity in question was related to inner-city neighborhood cultures, class, and relationships with African Americans. When asked how he sees himself in relation to other Asian Americans, Tommy centred his discussion of the Asians he feels similar to around issues of style, dress and music. He described an affinity to 'the ones that got the long hair, Goatee. The ones they wear their chains and they like Mac Dre and stuff like that'. Mac Dre was an African American hip-hop artist (deceased in 2004) known as one of the originators of hyphy music (and particularly Thizz music that celebrates ecstasy use) – the Bay Area hip-hop scene that

⁸See Warikoo (2007) and Wilkins (2008) for more on racial and cultural authenticity and 'wannabes'.

many of the young Southeast Asian respondents (and a few other respondents as well) particularly associated with. Part of what connected Tommy to other young Asian Americans with whom he identified was this hyphy music and its associated scene.

Hyphy, like the broader category of hip-hop, is not just about music, but brings together style, politics and artistic expression, as well as the use of ecstasy which is much celebrated within hyphy. Hyphy was central enough to their identity, including their ethnic identity, that a few respondents specifically referred to their friends as ‘hyphy Asians’. John (Cambodian/Chinese, 18) contrasts hyphy Asians with FOBs and bing bings. He said FOBs cannot get hyphy ‘they won’t be able to get down like that, no... They could go to clubs all they want but, they ain’t getting hyphy with us... It ain’t no bing-bings in my community’. Spider (Cambodian/Chinese, 15) said that ‘she can’t kick it with a lotta Asian people... cuz they too fobby’. Her discussion of FOBs never references being new immigrants, speaking English, nor any of the specific stylistic markers mentioned by some of the respondents earlier in this article. Instead, in her discussion FOB stands in for quiet, middle-class Asian Americans who seem to reflect the model minority image of Asian Americans. She contrasted fobby Asians from those like her who are ‘ghetto and stuff’. Ghetto people, she said ‘act hyphy and stuff’ whereas fobby people ‘they just act hecka quiet and stuff... like they don’t talk’.

While Nelson and many of his friends wished to distinguish themselves from the styles of ‘pretty boy’ Asians or ‘wannabes’, other respondents established their masculine identity in opposition to the image of Asian ‘thugs’ or ‘gangsters’ in the scene. For Deepak (Indian, 24) not only cultural consumption markers, including hip-hop music but also clothes and style, are key to the status distinctions he draws between ‘elite’ Indians and ‘thugs’.

They dress and act like thugs ... They guys cause a lotta trouble. It’s a very different sort of segment of the diaspora. These are just very different people I do not identify with at all. Um, they all look the same. Like 5 10 . And short spiky hair, earring ... small burns and the goatee ... they drive their rice rockets ... [they’re] embedded in hip-hop culture.

The category of ‘thug’ Asians arose in many interviews as a group that participants defined themselves against in the dance scenes. Certain clubs were described as being ‘more ghetto’ and having ‘more thugs’ and ‘gangsters’, particularly clubs associated with hip-hop music. Brandon (Korean, 28), for example, described one popular Asian clubs as having ‘a lotta thuggish people... I just don’t like that place... it’s more like the gangster types you see... there’s always fights’. Implicit in the discussions of thugs as a significant sub-group of Asian American youth, is a contest over competing forms of Asian American masculinity. These images have continuities with historical representations of Asian Americans. As Chua and Fujino (1999, p. 392) discussed ‘historically, U.S. institutional practices have rendered Asian American men as simultaneously hypermasculine and emasculated. [Though] today the model minority myth and asexual media representations have emphasized the feminized Asian American male’. In marking symbolic boundaries in the dance scenes, these young people draw on markers of style and visible consumption to construct authentic desirable Asian American masculinities and femininities – that are neither too FOB nor too whitewashed, too pretty nor too thuggish, often a precarious balance.

Othering in the rave scene: Asian E-puddles and E-tards

The final group of narratives highlighting symbolic boundaries in the dance scenes involves a number of young people involved in the rave scene, who disidentified strongly with ‘average’ or ‘typical’ Asian Americans and saw themselves as quite different from them. These respondents were heavily involved in the rave scene and were often advocates of the rave credo of PLUR (peace, love, unity, respect). They tended to attend raves in multi-ethnic

or primarily white social networks and not primarily with other Asians. This is not to say that there were not many other Asian Americans in the rave scene. These young men and women were quite cognizant, and indeed often quite critical, of the increasing numbers of Asian Americans found in raves in the San Francisco Bay area. But these respondents were clear to distinguish themselves from the other Asians in the scene, whom they criticized for being ignorant of or flouting the normative behaviours of the rave scene, including the PLUR ethos. They described a stereotypical Asian American at raves as an intensive ecstasy user who cares little for the communal elements of the rave and attends solely to hang out with their own narrow group of friends and to consume ecstasy.

Although some of our other respondents described their own drug consumption as unusual among Asian Americans and said that ‘typical’ Asian American youth are model students who do not use drugs (Hunt et al., 2011a; Moloney et al., 2008), these ravers do not find anything unusual or remarkable about ‘typical’ Asian Americans consuming drugs, particularly ecstasy. Indeed, heavy ecstasy consumption is a key part of their image of this typical Asian American. Instead, they are critical of the mode of drug consumption performed by other Asian Americans as over-obvious or too central to their activities at raves, which they say flouts the drug-consumption norms of true ravers. The narratives of this group of respondents work to distinguish themselves from ‘typical’ Asians in general, rather than simply certain smaller groups of other Asians (FOBs, thugs, squares), as other respondents in this article did.

Reina (Japanese/white, 20) described Asian Americans at raves as being in separate groups from other ravers, groups that she did not feel a part of. ‘The Asians always had their separate, like, group in the rave scene. Like even when it came to like drug dealers and stuff... There’d be the candy kid drug dealers and then there’d be the Asians. And you don’t fuck with the Asians’ territory, ‘cause they’ll kill you (Laughs). Like no joke’. Reina is heavily involved in the rave scene, calling it ‘her life’. She said she is not a typical Asian, but is a ‘whiteified’ Asian (to use her term) and was not able to mix with those Asian groups because ‘A lot of them don’t speak English’, (echoing the discomfort with foreignness discussed earlier in this article). Beyond this, she did not feel connected with them because ‘they’re not very PLUR... they’re just there to do, to do drugs and listen to trance... for the most part. They don’t socialize with anybody else. They keep to themselves. They associate with their own Asians but that’s it’. Unlike some other young people we interviewed, she is not asserting that typical Asian or Asian American youth don’t use drugs. Rather, she is criticizing ‘most’ Asians for using them inappropriately in the rave context – for not integrating the ecstasy aspect of the raves with the music and the ethos of the scene.

Reina said that she does have Asian friends, mentioning a few friends in particular, but she said that ‘we don’t have Asian cliques that. We kick it with. We kick it with each other, you know, and we’re Asian, but we’re not the typical Asian that you’re gonna see at a rave. Because, like I said, they isolate themselves’. She sometimes works promoting raves and said that when she’s handing out flyers, unless it’s for a ‘massive’ rave which she said most Asians attend, she doesn’t even bother to hand it out to Asians, at least not ‘typical Asians’. She said they are just not interested in the smaller, more underground raves. ‘They prefer massives. They prefer trance [music]. They like to race their cars. And they don’t speak really good English sometimes’.

The groups Maye and Reina distinguish themselves from – those who go to raves just for the drugs, and those who start trouble – were cited by other respondents as well, who connected this to Asian Americans in the scene. Edwin (Taiwanese, 24) used to attend raves frequently, but does so less now, in part because the scene has changed due to increased Asian American presence. ‘When I was going, when it was real popular, like there were Asians,

but there were a lotta Caucasians. That's when it was a lotta fun before. But nowadays, there's much fights and shooting, because it's more, it's too much Asians now'. He was not entirely sure why there was the difference, speculating that 'it could be because of the E... it could be [Asian] gangs'. In this discussion of menacing Asians ruining the scene, Edwin's narrative echoes a dominant stereotype of Asian Americans as a 'yellow peril': an image of Asians as an invading force, dating back in the USA context to at least to nineteenth century responses to Asian immigration and workers that portrays Asians as 'a threatening or insidious force to be reckoned with' (Shek, 2006, see also Kawai, 2005; Okihiro, 1994).

One accusation that came up in this set of narratives was that other Asian Americans were more likely to be 'squatters' or 'e-tarded' – people who are heavily intoxicated on ecstasy and are not dancing but are simply sitting on the floor. The use of loaded language like 'e-tarded' indicates the degree to which this is not merely a distinction being made between different types of rave participation, but a value judgement. While some respondents noted this as a common behaviour at raves in general (regardless of ethnicity), a few argued that this was partially a consequence of an influx of heavy ecstasy using Asian Americans in the scene. Indira (Indian/White, 27) commented that

For the most part, a lot of the Asians that I see in the rave scene, with the exception of ... a few others that are like more Western than not, I see them at trance parties, they come in large groups, they do lots of drugs, they sit on the floor, in corners, and like are totally like E-tarded ... and they all wear similar uniforms as in, like, with the tank-tops and the jeans and sneakers and the hat. I just don't feel I would have that much in common to go start a conversation with them.

She said she was not against all Asians in the scene, and the distinction she made between more or less acceptable Asians at raves centred around levels of acculturation or 'westernization', echoing some of the discussions of FOBs in the Asian club scenes. 'It's funny because some of my friends [at raves], now that I think about it, are Asian. [My friend] is Asian. She's in the rave scene too... but she is more of an alternative Western type of Asian'.

Warren (Vietnamese, 21) called this tendency to sit on the floor, intoxicated on ecstasy: 'Asian puddles. Asian E-puddles... Cause they don't go there to dance. They go there just to drop [take drugs]. And then they just sit on the floor. That's the stereotype of Asian people at raves'. He said the stereotype is not completely true for all Asians, such as himself. But 'most Asians that go, yes'. He drew clear distinctions between Asian ravers and non-Asian ravers and aligned himself with the latter camp. He said that Asian ravers 'they kill the vibe, pretty much. They stand there and just mean-mug everybody'. This latter aspect he particularly connects to 'Asian gangsters', another example of the concern with Asian thugs or gangsters in the dance scenes.

These young men and women demarcate themselves from others within the scene, whom they describe as less 'cool', who exhibit inappropriate behaviour (squatting/sitting rather than dancing; over-obvious intoxication), or even undermine the rave scene and its underlying PLUR ideology. These respondents often try to avoid these 'other' Asians by attending underground as opposed to mainstream or massive raves, where fewer 'unacceptable' Asians attend. Whereas the practice and motives of others (e.g. going to raves just for the ecstasy) are often deemed illegitimate, these respondents describe their own motives for attending raves (for the music, for the community) as legitimate or cool.

CONCLUSION: DISTINCTION, SUBCULTURAL CAPITAL AND ETHNIC CULTURAL CAPITAL

Marking symbolic boundaries and distinctions based on consumption and style is, of course, not unique to this particular youth culture. Thornton (1996) has influentially argued that such distinctions are at the core of the subcultural experience more generally. Her work focuses on hierarchies within popular culture, specifically within dance club cultures. She argues that these hierarchies are based largely around the possession of ‘subcultural capital’, which confers status upon people based on their knowledge of subcultural norms and their ability to evidence ‘hipness’ (e.g. through one’s record collection, one’s knowledge of obscure bands or DJs). This concept draws on Bourdieu’s (1984) work on distinction and cultural capital, ‘Just as cultural capital is personified in ‘good manners’ and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the forms of being ‘in the know’ (Thornton, 1996, pp. 11–12, see also Bielby & Bielby, 2004; Frith, 1996). In Thornton’s analysis class is less salient in the workings of subcultural capital (compared to Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural capital), but age and gender are quite significant.

In addition to these dimensions, the process of distinction discussed in our article is heavily bound up with ethnic identities as well. Thornton’s study focused on predominantly white club cultures and largely bracketed off issues of race or ethnicity. However, the taste cultures and consumption-oriented distinctions made in our interviews highlight the continuing salience of and interconnections between issues of class, gender, ethnicity and acculturation in the dance scenes. Whether criticizing FOBs, twinkies, pretty boys or thugs, the participants were working to distinguish themselves and their social groups by invoking appropriate displays of ethnic identity, describing themselves in opposition to ‘others’ in the scene.

A key dimension to the subcultural capital that appears to operate in the Asian American dance scenes has to do with racial or ethnic authenticity, establishing and displaying an appropriate or desired balance between foreignness and Americanness, and in relationship to a black/white racial binary, and performing appropriate ethnic or racial scripts (Appiah, 1994; Song, 2003). While for researchers like Thornton the currency of subcultural capital is knowledge of the scene, the cultural currency for our respondents includes ethnic identity or cultural practices related to establishing a particular ethnic identity within the scene (Hunt, Evans, Wu, & Reyes, 2005; Maira, 2002). Kibria (2002, p. 98) introduced the idea of ‘ethnic identity capital’ to refer to ‘the opportunities, broadly speaking, that accrue to [young Asian Americans] from other’s perception (whether justified or not) of them as a member of an ethnic community and hence able to tap into the social capital – the connections, solidarity and other resources – of that community’. This is not quite what is in play in the narratives here – Kibria’s focus in her discussion of ethnic identity capital was on inter-ethnic (primarily white/Asian) relations, while most of the distinctions made by respondents in this article were intra-ethnic or at least intra-Asian. But perhaps bringing together some notion of ethnic identity capital into Thornton’s subcultural capital (*ethnic subcultural capital?*) can provide some purchase for grappling with dynamics of distinction that are not reflected in most club cultures work that has focused primarily on white youth cultures.

Adopting particular styles – of music, clothing or drug use – and marking symbolic boundaries between groups allows young people to make a statement about who they are or who they aspire to be (Barth, 1969; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). By identifying with particular groups and rejecting others, an individual defines him- or herself. However, like all young people, their ability to choose a particular style or identity is constrained by wider structural characteristics, such as, in this case, being Asian American. Although Asian American youth can make stylistic choices – clothes, music, drugs – that mark themselves as more or less

'fobby', 'whitewashed' or 'thuggish', these choices occur within the wider society in which they are defined as Asian (Kibria, 2002; Song, 2003). Although they described the 'other' in consumption-oriented terms, these notions of the 'other' are attached to additional structural issues such as immigration generation, length of time in the USA, social class and ethno-national differences. These young people interpret different forms of ethnic identity as more or less cool or desirable. This can be seen from respondents' cataloging of the myriad forms of Asian American cultural expression within these scenes and the multiplicity of differing Asian American subgroups within them. They describe different ways of being Asian, different Asian American styles and taste cultures, as key symbolic markers that position them in relation to others within the scene and especially other Asian Americans.

One issue that remains to be examined is the connection between these subcultural ethnic distinctions and the reproduction of inequalities – both socioeconomic and racial/ethnic – in the broader society. Within Bourdieu's (1984) original formulations of cultural capital, the uneven distribution of cultural capital is a key element in the perpetuation of socioeconomic stratification. Kibria's (2002) ethnic identity capital too gets translated into social capital and has repercussions for one's economic and social standing. How, then, might the use of othering through style and consumption in this youth culture relate to the reproduction of inequalities (in health, labour, risk or other domains) in the USA? These issues go beyond the domain of this article, and the narratives of the young people who shared their experiences with us in the interviews. However, there will be crucial questions to ask in future research that can attempt to continue to question and bridge the connections between the so-called (sub)cultural and structural domains.

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Table I

Description of the participants.

	%	<i>N</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	54	135
Female	46	115
<i>Age (mean = 23.1)</i>		
15–17	8	22
18–20	25	62
21–24	30	75
25 and over	36	91
<i>Nativity</i>		
American born	69	172
Immigrated before age 6	18	46
Immigrated at age 6–10	5	13
Immigrated at age 11 or over	8	19
<i>Sexual orientation</i>		
Heterosexual	84	208
Homosexual	10	25
Bisexual	5	13
Other	1	3
<i>Ethnicities</i>		
Chinese	22	56
Filipino	16	39
Vietnamese	11	27
Cambodian	10	25
Indian	9	22
Korean	8	19
Japanese	3	8
Laotian	2	4
Taiwanese	2	6
Indonesian	1	2
Pakistani	1	2
Mien	1	3
Mixed	15	37