Figures in space, figuring space.
Towards a spatial-symbolic framework for understanding youth cultures and identities

Signe Ravn, University of Melbourne
Jakob Demant, University of Copenhagen

This is the accepted version of the article, ie the final version before layout and typesetting. Some minor changes may have occurred in the proof stages.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308816669256

Abstract
This paper argues for a need for spatial analyses in the study of youth cultures and youth subjectivities. With this aim, we propose a theoretical framework drawing on concepts from cultural class analysis in combination with concepts from human geography. Empirically, the paper is based on ten focus groups with young people (n=80) in four different parts of Denmark. The interviews included a photo elicitation exercise and the analysis in this paper focuses on one particular picture of two young ‘hipster’ men. By using the figure of the hipster as an analytical case, the paper illustrates how individual and spatial identities are co-constructed, not just alongside each other (relationally) but also hierarchically. Hence, ‘place-making practices’ are also ‘people-making practices’ and vice versa. Through this, the paper engages with discussions in youth studies as well as human geography about the importance of paying attention to structural inequalities.

Keywords: Youth; Visual Methods; Space and place; Social class; Subculture; Identity
**Introduction**

This paper is based on a Danish focus group study of youth cultural style in four geographical locations throughout the country. Denmark is a small country, the distances are small, and even the biggest city (Copenhagen, 1.2 mio inhabitants) is small by international comparison. People who do not know the country very well are often surprised when hearing that you can drive across the country in four to five hours. In addition, Denmark was an early adopter of high-speed internet and has a very wide coverage of internet access as well as high levels of use, even among older people, meaning that access to online communities and mediated life styles is easy and common. Hence, Denmark illustrates how time-space compression (Sheller & Urry 2006) can look in contemporary times and one might not expect to find major differences in terms of style, everyday life, identity formation etc. across the country. As we will show below, however, this was exactly the case in the study that forms the empirical case in this paper. Quite unexpectedly, we found marked differences in terms of cultural distinctions and youth subjectivities across the four locations. In other words, geographical location, or in more sociological terms place, played an active part. What also became clear, however, was that place was given distinct meanings across the locations and that this place-making had positive as well as negative aspects. These initial insights brought associations to human geographer Doreen Massey’s work on place and space. Massey asks:

> Can't we rethink our sense of place? Is it not possible for a sense of place to be progressive; not self-closing and defensive, but outward-looking? A sense of place which is adequate to this era of time-space compression? To begin with, there are some questions to be asked about time-space compression itself. Who is it that experiences it, and how? Do we all benefit and suffer from it in the same way? (Massey 1994, p. 147)

In this paper we follow Massey’s argument that there is a need for a double focus on, first, the subjective meanings attached to place and space and, second, on how social inequalities play into time-space compression and place and space more generally. To pursue the latter dimension we turn to sociological conceptualisations of social class and social differentiation and how these affect youth stylistic expressions and youth identities in general. This is not a new discussion in the field of youth studies; on the contrary, the discussion about how much scope structural explanations should be given in understanding young peoples’ style and cultural practises is long-standing and
ongoing. Even though the post-subcultures tradition (see e.g., Bennett 2005; Miles 2000; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003) has been arguing for a more fluid approach compared to the Birmingham School tradition (Hall & Jefferson 1976), there is still a strong insistence on the importance of social class for understanding young people’s engagements with different subcultures (see e.g., Blackman 2005; Griffin 2011; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006). We position ourselves in line with this insistence, and take our primary inspiration from recent forms of ‘cultural class analysis’ in and beyond the youth studies field, inspired by the work of Beverley Skeggs, Fiona Devine, Mike Savage and others. Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu these scholars emphasise how consumption, cultural practices and cultural representations are key elements in class-making and class reproduction. For instance, Tolonen (2013), in her analysis of youth cultural lifestyles and practices, argued for including habitual and cultural values (as well as locality, which we return to below) in analyses of such phenomena to be better able to grasp the classed dimensions of this.

Further, looking at school-based friendships among students in urban schools, Hollingworth (2015) has shown how particular classed (as well as gendered and racialized) identities are performed and reproduced through the students’ affiliations with different school-based subcultures. Hence, instead of (primarily) looking at how social class structures the engagement with various youth (sub-)cultures, this line of research sheds light on how such cultural practices produce classed subjectivities.

The present paper engages with the questions asked by Massey by combining cultural class analysis with a conceptual approach sensitive to spatiality. While paying attention to social space is not in itself new in the field of youth cultural studies (see for instance Bennett 2000; Chatterton & Hollands 2003; Nayak 2006; Tolonen 2013), the argument that we wish to put forth here is different. First, we wish to go beyond viewing space and place as a more or less neutral ‘backdrop’ or context for certain practices. Second, we also wish to move beyond a notion of space as a kind of ‘mediator’; that is, beyond analysing how cultural practices vary across different social spaces (Bennett 2000; Tolonen 2013), or how youth cultural expressions are ‘glocalised’, i.e. that global cultural phenomena are always appropriated in the light of the specific local setting (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard 2006). Instead, we wish to conceive of space and place in a more active manner; as part of structuring and forming youth cultures and as closely intertwined with youth subjectivities. Hence, by combining cultural class analysis with concepts from human geography we will illustrate how social spaces are constructed in hierarchical relations and how ‘place-making practices’
(Benson & Jackson 2013: Creswell 2010; Massey 1994) are at the same time ‘people-making practices’ – and vice versa; that performing subjectivities in social space is a way of producing that social space.

The paper is based on ten focus groups with young people in four locations. While the scope of the study is too small to make any substantial conclusions on each location, it serves as a case study to illustrate how a nuanced approach to (youth) everyday life in the broadest sense needs to take account of space and place. In other words, the aim of the paper is to argue for the need for a spatialisation of youth cultures in particular and youth subjectivities in general. This is not only necessary in order to move beyond the tendency to neglect rural youth and focus on young people in metropolitan areas (Farrugia, 2014), but is also important for a fuller understanding of the lives of urban youth as such. Hence, from a relational sociological point of view (Emirbayer, 1997) the urban and the rural (and everything in between) are informing each other and needs to be considered alongside each other.

More specifically, drawing on a photo elicitation exercise in the focus group study, we analyse how young people in different parts of Denmark perceive of a specific cultural figure with a distinct aesthetic look often described as a ‘hipster’, and how their ways of relating to this figure are simultaneously a way of performing specific subjectivities and producing specific places.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework informing the analysis draws on concepts from Pierre Bourdieu’s extensive tool box and contemporary work building on and developing some of these concepts, particularly in the work of Beverley Skeggs and Steven Threadgold. This is then combined with concepts from human geography to add a spatial dimension to the framework. Without pretending to present Bourdieu’s comprehensive theoretical framework in its entirety, in this section we first present the key concepts from Bourdieu’s work that form the basis of our approach. We then move on to introduce how this has been further developed by contemporary scholars and then introduce the concepts from human geography that we incorporate into this.

Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of distinction and taste as essentially socially structured are central to the analysis in this paper (Bourdieu 1984; 1989). The foundation for Bourdieu’s work on this was
an elaborate matrix showing how particular cultural preferences correspond to particular positions in society, or more accurately in the social space that society is made up of, and these positions are determined by the amount and composition of economic and cultural capital that each person possesses (Bourdieu 1989). Furthermore, the ‘third dimension’ of this space, the temporal dimension, i.e. the individual’s trajectory to the specific position he or she inhabits, forms and informs one’s disposition for certain preferences and not others (Bourdieu 1984, p. 108). In this sense, taste, as “manifested preferences” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 49), whether that is a taste for certain kinds of art, food or clothing, operates to a large extent in a pre-reflexive manner: “each taste feels itself to be natural – and so it almost is, being a habitus” (ibid, p. 49). In relation to the present paper this means that the young interviewees’ perceptions of what is ‘cool’ and less cool, ‘pretty’ or less pretty should be seen as formed by their position in social space and, as we will add in this paper, in physical space as well (geographical location). It also means that the young participants to a large extent navigate in the cultural landscape of style and culture in a naturalised manner (see also Bourdieu 1990, 2000).

Individuals in different positions (or belonging to different social classes) do not have equal access to defining what is perceived as legitimate and ‘good’ taste. Rather, Bourdieu emphasises the hierarchical nature of how taste works, reflecting the hierarchy of social space as such: individuals in dominant positions (in Bourdieu’s analysis this was the top bourgeoisie and the artists) reserve the power to define what has distinction. As will become clear in the analysis, this hierarchy not only pertains to positions in social space, but also to positions in geographical space, and the inferiority that Bourdieu would associate with the petite bourgeoisie and the working class is also at work between individuals from different positions in geographical space. According to Bourdieu, “tastes are first and foremost distastes” (ibid., p. 49); they are a rejection of the taste and preferences of others, and thereby a way of marking a distance to other positions in social space (Bourdieu 2000, p. 134). This is at the crux of the concept of distinction. The effort to mark these social and symbolic distances are often most intense with regard to positions ‘close to home’, i.e., to positions that inhabit almost the same position in social space (Bourdieu 1989).

**The subjective dimensions of class**

Over the past two decades a new wave of ‘cultural class analysis’ has gained momentum. Research from this perspective focuses on how class is constantly produced and reproduced through culture
and in that sense it has close affinities with the work of Bourdieu. One of the main scholars in this tradition is Beverley Skeggs, whose work mainly centres on processes of representation, identification and value (Skeggs 1997; 2004a; 2004b). Skeggs develops Bourdieu’s approach further by focusing not only on ‘exchange-value’ (i.e. how specific capitals can be exchanged) but also on ‘use-value’ (i.e. self-worth) (Skeggs 2004a), thereby adding a focus on the production of subjectivities. As will be clear in the analysis below, our study participants are not only positioning themselves in social space vis-à-vis others but simultaneously constructing subjectivities for themselves, including classed subjectivities. According to Skeggs, class is not necessarily something people actively identify with, or perhaps even something that is refused, but in any case class is performed through our doings and sayings (Skeggs 1997). Subjectivities are in that way also formed by class, and identities are therefore always class-specific (Skeggs 2004a; 2004b), whether this concerns our own identities through processes of identification, or those of others through processes of dis-identification, distancing or othering. Further, while Bourdieu defined (cultural) capital in absolute terms (for instance high culture), Skeggs underlines how the value of specific cultural attributes is dependent on it being acknowledged as valuable in a given context (Skeggs 2004a). This is central for the analysis in this paper as we aim to foreground the spatial as well as social ‘context’ in which the discussions in the focus groups are produced.

The ‘cultural class analysis’ has also been introduced to the field of youth studies. Most prominent is the work by Steven Threadgold, who combines Bourdieu’s and Skeggs’ approach with concepts from social theory and cultural studies to study representations of ‘style’ and the production of social class inherent in these. Threadgold draws on the work of Imogen Tyler to suggest that we conceptualise the hipster (and the bogan, a distinct Australian term) not as subcultures but as ‘figures’, i.e., as images or representations used in classificatory struggles (Threadgold forthcoming; Tyler 2013). While subcultures can be said to be about identification with specific aesthetic and cultural practices, hipsters (and bogans) are mainly used in terms of dis-identification. Figures, then, “are objectifying and othering” (Threadgold forthcoming, p. 22). Figures also generate affective reactions, be that insecurity, disgust or even revulsion.

Spatialising youth culture

What we wish to contribute in this paper is to argue that figures are not only socially and culturally produced, but also connected to the way we make places and make sense of places. With this we
emphasise the importance of understanding spatiality as connecting the symbolic and the social. With reference to human geographers Doreen Massey and Tim Cresswell, taste and style can be seen as not only varying geographically, but also as geographically produced.

Massey’s (2005) theory offers a focus on both place and space and views these as shaped in a complex interaction between the physical and the social. First and foremost Massey states that place contains a *thrown-togetherness* (Massey 2005). By this statement she is trying to show how the ‘identity’ of a place will always be created by the actual place in the physical sense *and* the events that take place there. Hence, the ways in which styles are expressed, perceived and sometimes rejected in the data are ways of making sense of place; the specific place in which the interviewees live. We produce a place in the way we inhabit it. However, place is not only created by an unproblematic fusion of place and event. Places also contain symbolic barriers that are created through, for instance, style and which have consequences for the potential for inclusion or exclusion in that particular place. The conflicts created in this way are reflected in the different attempts at regulation and in politics of space. Tim Cresswell uses the terminology ‘in place’ and ‘out of place’ (1996) to describe how specific ways of holding people in and out are created in urban space (Cresswell 1996). In this, Cresswell points out that urban space is not equally accessible or open to everyone. Cresswell’s thoughts are important since they show how both the physical adjustments of urban space and the ways in which urban space is used (e.g. through events) have consequences for how the city is constructed and experienced. Through this application of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power relations to a geographical analysis, Cresswell is able to add an important dimension to Massey’s work (Creswell 2002). In the analysis below, we will show how the concepts of ‘in place’ and ‘out of place’ as well as a ‘sense of place’ are central for understanding the negotiations that unfold in the focus groups. Before we do this, we will describe the methods and data from which we draw our analytic case.

**Methods and data**

To illustrate the analytical implications of the theoretical argument proposed in the paper we draw on data from a mixed methods study of youth everyday life in four different municipalities in Denmark. In this section we briefly describe the design of the study, focusing on the qualitative subproject. The four municipalities included in the study - Copenhagen, Aarhus, Holstebro and
Lolland – were selected to reflect different socio-economic characteristics (high vs. low SES) and size (urban vs. regional). We describe these four locations in more detail below.

The study consisted of a two-wave survey and a focus group study amongst participants drawn from the survey. In 2011, the first survey questionnaire was sent to 4,203 young people aged 15-18 years, selected via a probability sample from the Danish Central National Register. Of those, 2,950 respondents answered the questionnaire (70 %) and then received an invitation for a follow-up questionnaire. This second wave of the survey was conducted in early 2012 and 1,998 (47.5% of the original sample) respondents answered this questionnaire. The final sample survey consisted of 52% women and the mean age was 16.4 years. To go further into issues around youth culture and everyday life, the survey was combined with a smaller focus group study, also conducted in 2012. The focus group participants were sampled amongst those respondents who had agreed to be contacted again. Originally, three clusters reflecting the respondents’ current educational status – enrolled in high school, in vocational education and training (VET) or being outside of the educational system – were planned, but due to the limited number of respondents in the two latter categories, these were collapsed into one. In most cases, the young people not currently enrolled in any educational programmes were employed in low-skilled jobs as part of a ‘gap year’ (after having finished high school).

A total of 10 focus groups were conducted in Aarhus (three), Copenhagen (three), Holstebro (two) and Lolland (two). Altogether, 80 young people participated in the qualitative part of the study, 49 girls and 31 boys. The focus group participants were 16-19 years old (mean age 18). In Holstebro and on Lolland the interviews were held in rented facilities, while in Aarhus and Copenhagen they were held at the university. All focus groups were video-recorded and fully transcribed, and the names of participants are anonymised.

The four municipalities are located across Denmark. Copenhagen has around 700,000 inhabitants in the municipality of Copenhagen and 1.3 million in the larger urban area. Being the capital city, Copenhagen enjoys a privileged position relative to other Danish cities, not least because of the large gap population-wise to the second-biggest city, Aarhus, with around 330,000 inhabitants. Aarhus is situated on the east coast of Jutland (300 km from Copenhagen by car). Even though Copenhagen is significantly larger, both cities are economically thriving and, being university
cities, both are ‘young’ cities with numerous activities and options for young people and, especially in Copenhagen, the diversification of stylistic expressions and ‘scenes’ (Irwin 1977). In contrast to these ‘big’ (by Danish standards) cities, the two other locations are both provincial cities, but with very different characteristics. Holstebro is a smaller, provincial city and regional centre with around 35,000 inhabitants situated in the north-west of Jutland (around 350 km from Copenhagen and 120 km from Aarhus). Holstebro has a thriving commercial and cultural life and is known as a ‘culture city’ investing in performing arts, music etc. Furthermore, it is home to a number of educational institutions at the upper secondary and tertiary levels. The local labour market is dominated by smaller craftsman’s enterprises, farming and commercial and service sector jobs. Finally, Lolland, (which is not a city but a small island), a municipality in the southern-most part of Denmark, is a rural area with Nakskov being the regional centre and largest town. The two focus groups on Lolland were held here, but participants came from around the island. Nakskov has 13,000 inhabitants and is located 170 km from Copenhagen, while the municipality at large has 43,000 inhabitants spread over a predominantly rural area. Lolland municipality is one of the poorest and most disadvantaged municipalities, being in the top three among all municipalities with regard to unemployment rates, people outside the workforce and social benefits (Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd 2013).

Each interview lasted approximately two hours and was structured around four themes: everyday life, educational choices and aspirations, family relations, and partying and drug use. This paper mainly draws on discussions that arose in relation to the first theme, including a photo elicitation exercise (Harper 2002). Photos and other stimuli are common tools in focus group research (and other qualitative interviews) (Halkier 2010; Demant 2012), and can be of particular value in studies, such as the present, which focus on the mundane and sometimes pre-reflexive aspects of everyday life in that they serve as a way of drawing attention to these experiences and putting them into words (Bagnoli 2009; Ravn & Duff 2015). In the present study five photos of different youth cultural styles were passed around in the group, one at a time. The photos were selected because they depicted spectacular as well as more ordinary aesthetics including a group of ‘sporty’ young men; two ‘hip hoppers; a group of ‘ordinary’ young women dressed in plain, mostly black clothes; two young ‘hipster’ men and finally a group of ‘soft punk’ young women dressed in leather jackets, skinny jeans, boots or plateau shoes. The photos were passed around without any comments from the moderator, and the participants were asked to describe the persons in the picture, what they
thought of them, whether they were ‘familiar’ or not, and whether they could identify with them or not.

The picture of the two ‘hipsters’ resulted in the most diverse reactions across the focus groups and we therefore focus our analysis on this picture to illustrate the theoretical and analytical points of the paper. Below, we illustrate some of the reactions that this image provoked and then explore how the participants’ discussions of and dis-identification with the figure are not just ‘innocent’ expressions of taste and distaste in relation to specific aesthetics, but, drawing on Bourdieu and Skeggs, how the symbolic meanings attached to the hipster figure are part of the construction of highly classed subjectivities. Further, as is the key point of the paper, we will argue that these are not ‘flat’ subjectivities but intertwined with and co-produced in spatial hierarchies.

Analysis

The Hipster as familiar and conforming

The young men in the picture are photographed in the street in an urban environment, and while one of them poses with an ‘old school’ bike, the other is sitting on a bench next to a canal. Both of them are wearing beanies and tucked-up jeans, a Fjällräven-like rucksack and rough leather laced boots. One is wearing a pullover on top of a checked shirt, while the other is wearing a blue thermal jacket over a white t-shirt and has a full beard. Hence, they resemble the ‘hipster’ stereotype as this has been characterised in a number of texts (Threadgold forthcoming, Schiermer 2013).

The first point to be made in relation to the reactions to the picture in the focus groups concerns its familiarity. In the focus groups in the bigger cities, particularly among high school students, the participants immediately identify the figure in the picture as a ‘hipster’. Apparently the hipster figure is a central part of their everyday life; the two young men are described as someone who “looks almost like everyone in my class”, and thereby as the style-type, which has become “the most common style in some way”. The hipster figure is not only related to the school setting, though: “I could not take a stroll through the city without seeing several people looking like that. It is very, very common”, as Bodil from Aarhus expresses it. Besides recognising the figure, the participants go on to ascribe a number of characteristics to this, for instance “smoking menthol cigarettes” and “drinking lattes at [a café] while doing homework on a Mac [computer]”. In this
way, the hipster is seen as not only being about a particular, familiar aesthetic but as (for some at least) involving a whole lifestyle.

While in the academic literature the hipster is sometimes characterised by an ironic relation to objects and (older) style expressions (see Schiermer 2013), the perception of the hipster by several of the participants in this study is that he or her is a person who lacks self-irony and distance and therefore comes across as being too fashion-conscious, too “arrogant” and “superficial”. In two of the focus groups from Aarhus the participants are even debating whether the hipster look has become “mainstream”, i.e. that it does not carry any connotations of being avant-garde or standing out from the crowd in any way:

Oliver: It is like the hipsters are taking over town and it is very annoying!
Tina: They are sitting in every café.
Moderator: What is it that you find annoying about them?
Oliver: It’s because they think that they have all of the answers when it comes to music. And then every time a track becomes popular, they don’t want to listen to it anymore, because they think it has become bad […].
Karina: They are the sort of young people who are brought together by feeling unique, but they are such a big group that are something special, so then they just end up looking like each other (Aarhus).

The ‘hipster bashing’ that takes place in this quote has also been found in other studies (e.g., Michael 2015), particularly in much non-academic literature such as newspaper commentaries etc. as well (see Threadgold forthcoming for an extensive review of this). The lack of authenticity, even bordering on conformism, that the hipster is accused of appears all the more problematic given its insistence on exactly this in relation to music, clothing etc. In this way the hipster is not so much ‘read’ as a stylistic expression but rather becomes a figure that is used to navigate between styles. Hence, among the focus group participants who are familiar with the hipster figure (mainly those living in the bigger cities and to some extent high school students outside of these cities), the reactions are somewhat ambivalent – on the one hand, is it a very familiar aesthetic and one they can easily relate to, while on the other hand they are quite outspoken in their dis-identification with the figure. By showing their ability to scrutinize the hipster figure and ‘see through’ the attempts at
distinction, they are positioning themselves as superior to the hipster, which in return is constructed as lacking ‘fashion knowledge’ (cultural capital) and as expressing ‘bad taste’ or at least less a sophisticated taste than they themselves can demonstrate. Following Bourdieu and Skeggs, defining what counts as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste is restricted to ‘dominant’ or superior positions, which the interviewees here appear to naturally inhabit. However, at the same time they are also figuring the urban space as a quite stable and culturally fixed place, despite the many ‘events of place’ (Massey 2005) that inevitably occur here. Their sense of place produces an almost reactionary approach to the way they can figure different stylistic expressions in these places. However, as we will see below, this picture changes when looking outside the bigger cities.

Taking the hipster beyond the urban space: unfamiliar and ambiguous

In this section we will take a closer look at the discussions in some of the focus groups outside the bigger cities. In Holstebro, the responses to the picture in the focus group with high school students are partly similar to those in the interviews in the bigger cities. Thus, the participants do also recognise the figure and are familiar with this; the two young men in the picture are characterised as “the high school types”. In contrast to the ‘urban’ focus groups, the participants here are less outspoken in their dis-identification with the hipster figure. Further, there is less of a sense of the hipster being ‘all over town’ as was the case in the bigger cities, and it becomes clear how the figure is to a large extent an urban figure. We return to this dimension in the next subsection. When turning to the focus group with young people in vocational education and training, the discussion in the focus group takes on a very different character:

Bo: They have a posh education.
Moderator: They have a posh education, what makes you think that?
Bo: Because I think they look older and they are still wearing school bags, so they are on their way to becoming something big.
Moderator: So it is because they have the school ‘look’ but are older than you?
Bo: Yes.
Henrik: I don’t know why, but I think that this guy with the long beard, you would think he is an artist or something like that.
Moderator: What makes you think that? Is it the beard that does it, or what do you think?
Henrik: Yes, it is probably because he stands out from the crowd like… (Holstebro)

In this quote, a number of distinctions are at play. First, while none of the high school students have made any comments about the perceived age of the two young men in the picture, age is noted here. The combination of a perceived older age and wearing rucksacks (ie., ‘school bags’) lead the participants here to conclude that the two men must be students enrolled in higher education and in that sense en route to something more “posh” than their own vocational education. In this sense, to the participants here the hipsters come to carry connotations of an (upper) middle class position (at least in the future); one superior to their own (expected) position. Further, in contrast to the earlier mentioned claims by some participants about the hipster aesthetic constituting today’s mainstream look, the men in the picture are in this focus group clearly seen as being extraordinary and ‘standing out’, not only with regard to their educational level but also aesthetically. Thus, Henrik’s suggestion that they might be “artists” indicates the unfamiliarity and even the mystique associated with the figure as a whole. In Holstebro, as in most Danish provincial towns, artists are few and far between, and the term hence captures the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the figure as well as its larger amount of cultural capital. However, while on the one hand we find an acknowledgment of the cultural capital which well-educated people and artists (i.e. the two men in the picture) supposedly possess, the quote can also be seen to be voicing a collective identity as ‘ordinary people’ in an ‘ordinary town’, in contrast to something that is “posh” and a bit fuzzy. To sum up, while there is no identification with the figure at all in this quote, the dis-identification is very different from what we saw earlier on. Here there is no ‘hipster bashing’ taking place. Instead the figure is taken to represent something more “posh” but also more ambiguous than the participants’ own everyday lives. As such, the participants in these groups seem to associate the hipster figure with a distance towards accepted – mainstream – styles (Schiermer 2013). Another indication that the hipster figure is ‘out of place’ in Holstebro is the bike in the picture. In Holstebro (and also on Lolland, which we return to below), the distances between friends, or between one’s home and the nearest upper secondary school, are often seen as too long to be suitable for a bike ride. The bike is seen as an accessory for an urban lifestyle and in that way confirms the participants’ impression that the men in the picture are not ‘locals’.

When the hipster is out of place
While the dis-identification with the hipster figure in the quote above was related in part to a perceived hierarchical relation between the interviewees and the figure, but also to the figure being ambiguous, this is different in the quote below, which is from a focus group in Nakskov in the Lolland municipality.

Dorthe: You would just never see them [the two young men in the picture] on Lolland.
Moderator: Never?
Dorthe: Never!
Moderator: Why?
Dorthe: Then you would have to go to Nykøbing [nearby regional centre] to find people brave enough to wear clothes like that.
Moderator: Brave enough to wear that kind of clothes?
Dorthe: But, I simply don’t believe that you can get that kind of stuff here on Lolland (everyone is laughing)
Lena: Well, we don’t exactly have the biggest (laughing), the biggest selection of clothes here in Nakskov.
Helle: I agree with Dorthe. It isn’t exactly that kind of clothes you find here in Nakskov, [not] that kind of people, you know.
Co-interviewer: What kind of people is this then?
Lena: Well, someone brave enough to stand out like that.
Dorthe: Well, someone who knows their style, right? Because down here it is often that you just wear what you can just get in the one clothing store, right? Then that is what you wear (Lolland).

What we see in this quote is a marked, perceived inferiority in relation to the hipster figure and what it is seen to represent – which is not so much a specific aesthetic but rather a number of personality traits (see also Tyler 2013). As in the quote above, the hipster is clearly ‘out of place’ and the dis-identification is unanimous. However, here this is not only because of the practical barriers involved in even obtaining the look in the first place, but because the person who has a taste for such a look does not fit into Lolland as a social space. In other words, had anyone wanted to dress like the two young men in the picture, they could have found the clothes online, in a
second-hand shop or on a shopping trip to Copenhagen. But this is not the reason. Rather, as the participants explain, the look is for different “kinds of people”. On Lolland no one would be “brave” enough to stand out like the two young men in the picture. Further no one would “know their style”, i.e., have the sufficient amount of cultural capital, to even put together such a look. In that sense, the hipster figure is constructed as superior to the participants in terms of the cultural capital it is believed to possess, at the same time as Lolland is constructed as a place where people are not in the know style-wise. Interestingly, in contrast to the first quote, in which the hipster figure was ridiculed for its preoccupation with aesthetics, being knowledgeable in regard to fashion is in this focus group constructed as a positive skill, but a skill people on Lolland are missing. As Ingrid says in the other focus group on Lolland, the young men in the picture are “too style-conscious” to be from Lolland, and Ole adds “you have to bear in mind that we are on Lolland”, as if to remind the interviewer that young people here cannot be expected to possess the same knowledge as young people elsewhere. While Holstebro was constructed as an ‘ordinary place’ for ‘ordinary people’ in both positive and less positive ways, Lolland is constructed more negatively as ‘in deficit’ and inferior, both in terms of the possibilities that the place offers but also in terms of people's knowledge.

**Discussion: Figuring space and maintaining a sense of place**

In the analysis we have illustrated how the figure of the hipster brings forth very different associations across the four locations included in the empirical study. Overall, the participants in the focus groups all distanced themselves from the figure, but for very different reasons. While the urban group defined the familiar figure of the hipster as mainstream conformists and thereby indirectly as less sophisticated than them, the reactions outside of the bigger cities were different. In the prosperous town of Holstebro, the hipster was an ambiguous figure; distinguished but yet not entirely admirable. And on Lolland, the figure not only out of place in terms of its aesthetics but even more so in terms of the amount of cultural capital it was seen as embodying. Thus, the analysis showed how distinctive hierarchical, or classed, identities were produced through these expressions of taste and distaste. These classed identities are not ‘flat’ but co-construct specific places. And mirroring the hierarchical relations between identities, the relations between places are also hierarchical: some places – and people – are inferior to other places – and people.
The relation between these places is unequal due to the way in which they are ascribed meaning or represented in the media as well as in public discourse. For instance, the discourse surrounding ‘Udkants-Danmark’ (the Danish ‘outskirts’) is largely derogatory and describes these areas as ‘deprived and in deficit’ while urban areas are most often defined in a positive way. With Bourdieu we can describe this geographical variation – material as well as symbolic – as the result of differentiations in the composition of capital, and in that way as an overlap between the symbolic space, i.e. the distribution of capital, and geographical space (Bourdieu 1984; see also Holt 2008). Not so different from this, urban sociologist Rob Shields would term these outskirts ‘places on the margins’ (Shields 1991), thereby alluding to their cultural marginality and their stigmatised character. According to Shields, the ‘centre – periphery’ distinction that geographers often apply is not simply a matter of location and geographical distances, but first and foremost a matter of cultural hierarchies (Shields 1991). He linked this binary to another binary; that of ‘high versus low culture’ (i.e. very similar to Bourdieu): “The social definition of marginal places and spaces is intimately linked with the categorisation of objects, practices, ideas and modes of social interaction as belonging to the ‘Low culture’, the culture of marginal places and spaces, the culture of the marginalised” (Shields 1991, p. 4f). Bourdieu as well as Shields are relevant for understanding the hierarchical relations between the four places in our study – and, crucially, between the identities that are constructed together with these places. However, by combining the above focus on the cultural and symbolic dimension with a dynamic view on the geographical dimension we have gone beyond this approach and illustrated how places and identities are being produced simultaneously.

By using the hipster figure as a case in point, we have illustrated how important nuances are added to our understanding of the figure by paying attention to both the classed and spatialised dimensions of this figure. We have also shown how the participants’ sense of place is not only productive and positive in terms of creating feelings of belonging, but that it also produces feelings of inferiority. Having a ‘sense of place’ means understanding and complying with the boundaries for what is the acceptable aesthetic here. For instance, when the hipster is ‘out of place’ on Lolland, the young people here cannot identify with this at the same time as identifying with Lolland as a place. Does this mean that we can make the, somehow trivial, conclusion, that the fluidity of styles and expressions is a privilege that only urban youth holds? At a first glance, yes; as the analysis showed the participants from urban areas were familiar with the figure and to a larger extent able to relate this to their own position in social space. However, this did not mean that these participants
identified with the hipster figure. On the contrary, they were distancing themselves from the hipster figure as well, but for other reasons than the participants in the more rural areas. Instead of the hipster being out of place and in that sense at odds with the participants own sense of place (in a human geography sense), the figure came to represent bad taste and hence collide with the sense of place (in the Bourdieusian sense) and hence the classed identities that these young people were performing. Bourdieu (1984, p. 171) describes taste as a mechanism by which one can navigate symbolically: ”through taste, an agent has what he likes because he likes what he has”. This ‘taste of necessity’ not only pertains to Lolland; rather, all places locate and fix the possibilities for being able to be other than what is.

These insights are central for understanding how figures are used to construct not only particular hierarchical subjectivities, as described by Tyler (2013) but also hierarchical spatial relations. In other words, a figure becomes a tool for navigating style and other cultural expressions in ways where we can keep in correspondence with our own subjective class position. Hence, the classed and spatialised dimensions of the figure are mirrored in – and intertwined with – the identities that the interviewees perform. For instance, the participants who feel that they inhabit a place with low cultural capital do not even dare envisioning themselves beyond that specific location – both in symbolic and geographical terms. In the words of Skeggs, “the refusal to accept inscription and be bound by its value is a significant act in challenging the dominant symbolic order” (Skeggs 2004a, p. 13). However, as we saw, this did not happen outside the larger cities. The figure appears to be so much out of place and related to specific settings (urban, high levels of cultural capital) that it rather seemed to enhance the feelings of inferiority and marginality in relation to style among the participants here. In this way, what might at first glance appear as ‘leisurely’ and ‘innocent’ youth cultural phenomena also affects (young) people’s future mobility.

**Conclusion**

Apart from notable exceptions, space has been somewhat absent in the youth studies field (Farrugia 2014). As the case study of the hipster figure illustrates, social space is important, not only as the contextual backdrop of ‘variations’ in youth cultures, but as actively contributing to the production of such cultures and the identities that come along with them. Importantly, these identities are not only relational, but also hierarchical; social class and space intersect to produce the parameters within which identities can be performed and styles enacted. Individual and spatial identities are co-
constructed, not just alongside each other (relationally) but also hierarchically, i.e. with reference to
differential (classed) positions in social as well as geographical space, producing feelings of
superiority and inferiority, respectively. Even though youth cultural styles are often presented as
“pick’n mix” cultures, the ways in which these can be enacted are structured by the classed and
spatial meanings associated with such styles. As we have seen, identifying with a place and having
‘a sense of place’ entails a number of restrictions on which stylistic expressions are considered
acceptable, or in other words, which figures can inhabit which spaces.

1 The survey was conducted by colleagues at Center for Alcohol & Drug Research, Aarhus University, Denmark, and
led by Professor Mads Uffe Pedersen. The authors are grateful for being allowed ongoing access to the qualitative data.
References


Author/s:
RAVN, S; Demant, JJ

Title:
Figures in space, figuring space: towards a spatial-symbolic framework for understanding youth cultures and identities

Date:
2017

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/294909