Specialty Retailers as Cultural Intermediaries:
A Social Analysis of the Retail Store Owner

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A Thesis
In the Department
of Communication

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Masters of Arts (Media Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 2012

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: Specialty Retailers as Cultural Intermediaries: A Social Analysis of the Retail Store Owner

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts (Media Studies)

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Date April 12, 2012

ABSTRACT

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Retail stores are recognized as important economic institutions in Western cities. They are heavily depended on for the goods and services they provide. As consumers in today's market have developed a greater interest in the symbolic meaning of goods and services, this suggests that the retailer's impact can be felt beyond the economic sphere. This thesis attempts to understand the social impact of specialty retail store owners. By primarily drawing connections between the specialty retailer's work and that of the cultural intermediary, the store owner is identified as a social agent and the social aspects of their occupational activities are suggested. The concepts of taste and subculture are important in this analysis as the retailers in this study hinge their activities on supporting a specific taste which is recognized as subcultural. The discussion of both concepts expose their central role in the organization and formation of social groups and offer points of reference with which to guide an analysis of the specialty retailers. Three case studies are conducted and compared. Based on the data gained through interviews, observations, and textual analyses, an assessment of the stores' specialized goods, their presentation, and the retailers' activities are made. What is confirmed is the retailers' role as cultural intermediaries and their ability to support the social negotiations of their consumers.

Through their work as cultural intermediaries, the influence they make on individuals can be seen as also impacting social relations and the overall social structure.

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Introduction

Sarah Thornton, a Subcultural Studies theorist, examines how people make a living based on subcultural tastes, ideologies, and social connections. In her book *Club Cultures* she states:

> DJs, club organizers, clothes designers, music and style journalists and various record industry professionals all make a living from their subcultural capital. Moreover, within club cultures, people in these professions often enjoy a lot of respect not only because of their high volume of subcultural capital, but also from their role in defining and creating it (12).

In this quote the concept of "subcultural capital" is raised by Thornton. She indicates that subcultural capital is the currency people need in order to benefit from incorporating subcultures in their work. But Thornton also shows that individuals who make a living from subcultures could potentially possess the power of defining what can be considered as cultural capital. Her research highlights the possibility for individuals to pursue work that is both financially beneficial and socially relevant, particularly within a subcultural context.

This thesis will further explore this cultural dimension of economic life by analyzing the work of specialty retail store owners. The study will consider how the owners are able to revolve their work activities around subcultures, while taking an active role in influencing those cultural groups. As Thornton's quote suggests, there are not only financial benefits, but also social benefits to be gained from subcultural capital. The social aspects of specialty store owners' work will be the focal point for this research.

Retail stores have long been recognized as important economic institutions in Western cities. Their prominence is visible by their abundance and by the importance of consumer goods in everyday life. This thesis considers the impact of these stores in the social sphere. The specific objective of the thesis is to examine how specialty retail store owners socially engage themselves. The study will assess the symbolic meanings and social implications of work done by specialty retailers, and investigate their roles as cultural intermediaries.

My interest in this topic was piqued by a visit to **The Bombshelter**, a retail store that specializes in providing products used primarily for graffiti. The store carries spray paint, caps, paint markers, and magazines about graffiti culture, to name a few examples. From that first brief visit it grew apparent that frequenters of **The Bombshelter** were not at the store solely to purchase goods, but also to socialize. There were people lounging on a couch and chatting inside the store, while others gathered in front of the store. Another individual, seated at a desk provided, was working in his sketchbook. Zion, the owner of **The Bombshelter**, appeared to be very comfortable with having people linger in his space, and in fact he encouraged it. In addition to providing the couch and desk for individuals to use, Zion could be found actively participating in conversations with patrons or providing guidance to those working in their sketchbooks. It quickly became clear that Zion was an important and recognizable figure for this group of individuals, as everyone knew him by name. Zion and his store's patrons appeared to form a social group, and **The Bombshelter** was central to their relationship.

The idea of the retail store as a possible hub for social relations and cultural development had not occurred to me prior to this encounter. What struck me as very

interesting about the store and Zion's work was his ability to tread between this realm of being an economic institution on the one hand, and being a cultural member on the other hand. Zion and his work poignantly demonstrated that a retail store owner, through committing a space to providing specific goods and services, can be socially relevant. His work at **The Bombshelter** shed light on the considerations retail store owners must weigh when negotiating their need to work and their social and cultural objectives. Which I believe has become more prominent in this day and age. Lifestyle has become a focal point for individuals and I'll discuss this in relation to consumer culture and purchasing decisions later on. However, I think we can see lifestyle considerations reflected in other aspects of ours lives as well including what we choose to pursue as a career.

This was further reinforced by the store's focus on catering to expressions of a unique taste. Graffiti can be found everywhere in Toronto, but there are very few artists who actively create these stylized writings and images. In addition to the fact that graffiti artists are a minority even within the artistic community, there is a general lack of appreciation for graffiti art. This is made apparent by the city bylaws ("The Graffiti Abatement Program") which prohibit graffiti production.

In addition to **The Bombshelter**, I will also analyze two other retail stores: **Cosmos Records,** and **Come As You Are (CAYA)**. These two retailers support expressions of taste that are less contentious than those **The Bombshelter** supports. But the particular preferences these retailers cater to are also uncommon, and also recognized as being in opposition to the "mainstream." **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records,** and **CAYA** are independently owned specialty stores located on Queen Street West, in the central downtown area of Toronto, Canada. They each support different consumer

markets, but all three are similar in their support of a perceived subculture and its tastes. **The Bombshelter**, as specified above, is a retail store that provides spray paint, caps, paint markers, and other goods that are relevant to graffiti culture. **Cosmos Records**, which has expanded into two stores, is involved in providing strictly vintage, vinyl records. **CAYA** is involved with promoting "sex-positivity" through providing a diverse range of sex-related goods and services. Each of these retailers have achieved a high degree of success through their specialization, which makes them excellent cases to study.

The work of a specialty retail store owner gives the owner the opportunity to channel their efforts towards social purposes. This occupation provides an individual with the opportunity to pursue work that would still enable them to support their preferred lifestyle of way of life. The specialty retailers in this research will be assessed as cultural intermediaries whose work functions to support their subcultural tastes and enable acquisition of social recognition from their peers. The concept of "cultural intermediary" derives from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist. Bourdieu introduced the concept in his book *Distinction,* as a way to describe the social characteristics of a specific class, the new petite bourgeoisie. Bourdieu feels that the work of cultural intermediaries exemplifies the efforts and aspirations of this particular class. He argues that members of the new petite bourgeoisie class have used this kind of work to validate their tastes and skills and challenge established values and the current social order. By aligning the characteristics of Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries with those possessed by Toronto specialty retailers, this study will reveal the similarities of their social purposes, their activities, and their influence in society.

One of the key similarities between cultural intermediaries and specialty retail store owners is that both provide symbolic goods. The work of retail store owners is based on the practical provision of goods and services. The retailers featured in this thesis primarily offer goods to their patrons. Therefore consumer goods function as the foundation for the social connection between retailers and their consumers. The study will provide a social perspective on retailing work by examining the signification involved when retailers provide goods as symbols.

Symbols, such as consumer goods, will be identified as social markers that express the tastes and social alignments of individuals who possesses them. These social markers provide a means to understand the organization of social groups through the reflection of preferences, values, and the social standing that each individual expresses. By understanding symbols as a form of communication, we can recognize symbols such as consumer goods as tools for shaping how social groups are organized. This study will analyze specialty retailers through two aspects of signification: 1) the communicative value of symbols, and 2) their structural impact. All the arguments and theories raised in this thesis will be grounded in this understanding of signification.

The social impact of cultural intermediaries depends on their selection of symbolic goods. Therefore the retailer's ability to choose which goods to provide to consumers will be recognized as an important opportunity to determine what social impact they will make. The role of retail store owners inherently privileges them with the chance to determine what type of goods to make available, which consumers to appeal to, and thus what ideas to communicate. As the retailers in this study are specialty stores, their selections of goods are very specific. For this reason, we can hypothesize that they

appeal to a specific consumer market, communicate specific tastes, and emphasize certain values through their specialization.

Bourdieu discussed the social impact of cultural intermediaries in terms of class differences, but this thesis will examine the concept in relation to cultural groups. As described earlier, **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records** and **Come As You Are** all appeal to tastes that are not common. An analysis of the goods they provide and a discussion of the stores' objectives will reveal the subculture markets and social groups these retailers engage with. This study will also draw on Nancy MacDonald and Sarah Thornton's subcultural analyses to help illuminate the connection between subcultures and retailers. Both MacDonald and Thornton recognize the self-created nature of subculture formations and identities. Both authors emphasize social distinction, particularly a binary distinction between the subculture and the "mainstream," or an imagined "other," as the primary indicator of the subculture's identity. Thus the retailer's activities of identifying their goods and standing in opposition to the mainstream reveal their target markets as subcultures, and point to their methods of socializing.

Signification can be understood as a means through which social agents can express themselves and engage socially. Symbols, such as the consumer goods offered by retailers, are vehicles through which these social agents communicate, make meaning, and impact the organization of society. To understand signification within the context of subcultures, we can refer to the concept of subcultural capital for greater clarity.

Sarah Thornton developed her specific concept of subcultural capital based on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. The root of both ideas is derived from the general notion of "capital", which Bourdieu identifies as the currency by which social acceptance

and mobility are determined. The cultural capital people possess reflect their taste, and in doing so, communicates their social position. Bourdieu argues that a number of factors shape the development of taste, including income and education. He states that the organization of Western society is communicated, read, and understood through taste. As such, one's taste is indicative of one's social affiliation and status. Capital can therefore be acquired and utilized to advance one's position, in accordance with taste. Cultural capital, in specific, allows for social gain through the cultural affiliations and cultural knowledge one possesses.

Thornton's research focuses on the way subcultures possess very specific ideas of value, and how their concepts of "subcultural capital" reflect these ideologies and provide social mobility for these particular social agents. The subjects in this study engage with subcultures, and for this reason Thornton's concept of subcultural capital applies. This analysis will demonstrate how the specialty retailers in these case studies encourage the recognition of their goods as subcultural capital and promote their subcultural affiliations. This thus frames their specialized goods as valuable, coercing their acceptance and the retailer's ability to shape the culture and the formation of the group. I argue that it is primarily subcultural capital that specialty store owners make available to their patrons, through its manifestation as specialized consumer goods. Therefore the social relevance of specialty retail stores derives from their support of particular tastes, from the social tools they offer, and the cultural parameters they define.

At the crux of this study is an awareness of social hierarchies that are present in our society, and of the perpetual effort by social agents to gain recognition and acceptance. The dense and diverse society of Toronto is socially complex and

multilayered. The city is a space where people come together or divide along numerous lines at any given time. Therefore, along with multiple social groupings, there are also multiple hierarchies that co-exist and influence each individual. The diversity of an environment such as that of Toronto appears to nurture the variation of cultural groups. However, while the city's diversity encourages individuality and distinct social groupings, this does not lessen the individual's need for social acceptance and recognition.

This research focuses on the individual pursuit of social acceptance and advancement among peers. Additionally it examines how the use of symbols impacts these social relations. As signification is a dominant theme in this research, this study falls within the realm of Media Studies and Communication Studies. In examining the topic of consumer culture and paying special attention to goods as symbols, the analysis delves into how commodities can be constructed to communicate ideas, and how they can influence social relations.

The specialization of the retail stores is a critical aspect of their work, and this research highlights this. The retailers featured in this research specialize in products that are geared towards unique lifestyle preferences. By incorporating insights from MacDonald and Thornton's research, this study will examine the retailers' unique lifestyle preferences as subcultural tastes. Therefore this research also falls within the parameters of Subcultural Studies.

The unique feature of this research is the application of subcultural theories to the topic of consumer culture. Angela McRobbie, in her essay "Second-hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket," identifies a lack of literature that considers the spaces in which

subcultural groups gather. Her study is one of a very few that specifically considers the work of retailers from a subcultural perspective. She argues that in failing to recognize the more mundane and modest experiences of engaging with retail stores, most analysts fail to recognize the importance of retailers in shaping subcultural organizations, and in the development of subcultural meanings. This thesis will, therefore, help fill this void and shed some light on the social dynamics of the retailer's work.

This research hinges on several key theoretical concepts, which were introduced above. The paper will thus begin with a literature review in Chapter One to establish the conceptual framework. Signification, the concept that forms the foundation for this research, will be discussed within the context of consumer culture. This will be followed by an examination of the subcultural theories by Nancy MacDonald and Sarah Thornton. Finally, Bourdieu's ideas of taste and cultural intermediaries will be tied into the discussion.

Chapter Two will describe the context for this research. The chapter will commence with a description of the retail industry and consumer market in Toronto, which is particularly competitive and dense in the downtown location where **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records**, and **Come As You Are** operate. The developed retail market in this location and its cultural diversity will provide an indication of why specialty retail stores can exist, thrive, and be influential in this social environment. In addition to a city profile, Chapter Two will also provide a description of the specific wards in which these retail stores are located. Finally, this section will discuss how the sample group of stores was chosen, and will give a brief introduction to each store.

The second half of Chapter Two will describe the methodology of this research. The methods used to conduct this analysis are derived from ethnography. **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records**, and **Come As You Are** will each be analyzed as individual cases and then assessed through comparison. A case study analysis is particularly effective for this research, as it enables an in-depth analysis of the three stores, their activities, objectives, and the social relations they attempt to develop. Having multiple case studies allows for comparisons between subjects, which will then reveal any commonality or deviation between them, as well as any possible trends.

With each case study, the same methods were used to gather qualitative data. This data revolves around what kinds of products and services the retailers provide, who they appeal to, how their stores are presented, and what messages they communicate. To obtain this information, I relied largely on interviews with the owners. Additionally, I examined the stores through observation and textual analysis. I made direct observations to identify the products carried, the organization of the space, the décor, and the kinds of social interactions taking place in the space. I also used textual analysis to support a deeper investigation into the meaning of the symbols the retailers use, and to gain a better understanding of the messages being communicated through the presentation.

For each case study, the following research questions guided the investigation: What are the key activities of the retail store owner? What is the specialization of the store? What is the owner's objective for the store? Who is their target market? What is the history of the store? What is the history of the retail store owner? What is being communicated through specializing? Are cultural meanings being constructed and communicated? What are they? What are the possible social impressions being made

through the work of these retailers? What does this reflect about the specialty retailer and about his or her occupation? The data acquired by raising these questions helps reveal how retailers interact socially through their work.

While explaining the methodology of this research, I incorporate the concerns or issues that arose while gathering the data, along with my responses to those concerns. I will also discuss ethical concerns and my efforts to maintain safety standards.

In Chapter Three I will describe and assess the data acquired, and discuss the case studies both individually and through comparison. The chapter will begin with a description of the specializations for each store, and the agency that the retailer exercises. The research will then identify the cultural meanings and values these retailers create through their efforts to specialize. This initial discussion will illuminate the particular market that each retailer targets. Then the chapter will examine how the retail spaces and products are presented, as well as how the owners describe their stores. This discussion highlights the retailers' perceptions of their target markets as subcultures. To conclude the third chapter, an overview analysis will show the connection between the work of these retailers and that of cultural intermediaries. I will explore the similarities of these roles in terms of the kinds of capital they possess and leverage, the symbolic goods they provide, and the ways their work poses challenges to established culture.

The final chapter will further analyze this information and confirm the social activity of **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records**, and **Come As You Are** through the role a cultural intermediaries. The chapter will emphasize the specialty retailers' abilities to articulate particular subcultural tastes and provide subcultural capital for a social group. It will be concluded that through their work activities, these retailers influence and support

an individual's social negotiations. As a result, and true to their role as cultural intermediaries, the impressions the retailers leave on individuals also impacts the relationships between people, as well as the social structure in general.

Chapter One: Theoretical Background

Signification and Consumer Culture

Numerous social theorists have acknowledged signification as a prominent aspect of cultural life. Its prominence is due to the way it serves as a vehicle for communication and, as will be discussed, for acquiring social recognition. The organization of society is not a one-tiered structure where every individual is equal. Its organization has an hierarchal structure, where each individual is immersed in efforts to empower him- or herself through the use of signification. We can see in this constant presence of hierarchies and the efforts people put into expressing themselves that individuals place great importance on gaining recognition and social acceptance. From this perspective, one can then see how the recognition people receive from peers is a measure of their social status, self-worth, and the privileges or power they can possess. Thus the desire for these benefits is a basic motivation in all our social negotiations. The ideas of signification, communication, social organization, and social recognition are important in this research, as they help reveal how the work of specialty retail stores becomes socially relevant.

A number of theorists have expressed concern about the impact of signification on individuals and society. These concerns and arguments come primarily from observers of popular culture and mass media. Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist and cultural theorist, is mainly concerned about society's oversaturation with symbols and the bombardment by symbolic messages in his book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. In this book Baudrillard stresses the negative impact that this hyperreal environment has on individuals. William Leiss, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, and Jacqueline Botterill similarly

consider the symbolic environment and its impact on the population. In their book *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Images of Well-Being,* the theorists base their arguments on an analysis of advertising. Focusing on this form of mass communication has also yielded concerns about the types of ideas being communicated through signification, and their social or cultural impact. However, these arguments depict a complex characterization of advertising rather than a strongly negative portrayal of signification. These authors, including Baudrillard, have focused on large-scale issues of popular and mass culture and in that case, these studies have tended to ignore the signifying efforts of individuals or small-scale groups. A number of theorists such as Dick Hebdige, John Clarke *et al*, Kobena Mercer, and Sarah Thornton have shifted the focus to individuals and smaller groups. Their analyses have helped to identify the great accessibility of symbols, and to show how symbols can be reappropriated from the realm of the masses for purposes of individual social benefit.

In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige identifies personal style (expressed through attire and hairstyle for example) as a method of communicating in unspoken codes. He suggests that we experience and organize our social world through these symbolic codes. Hebdige describes the symbolism of conventional outfits which exemplify normalcy:

> Each ensemble has its place in an internal system of differences—the conventional modes of sartorial discourse—which fit a corresponding set of socially prescribed roles and options. These choices contain a whole range of messages which are transmitted through the finely graded distinctions of a number of interlocking sets—class and status, self-image and attractiveness, etc.

> Ultimately, if nothing else, they are expressive of "normality" as opposed to "deviance" (i.e. they are distinguished by their relative invisibility, their appropriateness, their "naturalness") (34).

Based on this understanding, Hebdige states that violations of authorized dress codes have considerable power to provoke and disturb. Furthermore, Hebdige argues that intentional communication deviating from the norm "stands apart" and is "a visible construction, a loaded choice" (134). Therefore it must be a conscientious effort that people put into assembling their personal items. We can recognize these items as individual symbols, which are then used to create and communicate messages.

An essay by subcultural theorists John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts provides an example of how attire can be employed by a social group in order to express certain ideas and make social negotiations. Their essay "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class" explores the activities of British youth subcultures, and discusses consumer behaviour in terms of identity and class struggle. These authors suggest that the subculture's attempt to negotiate their collective struggle involves the reappropriation of articles of clothing into distinctive styles. Through this method, these youths are able to express their collectivity, create new meanings, and project a cultural response to their social experience:

> It is this reciprocal effect, between the things a group uses and the outlooks and activities which structure and define their use, which is the generative principle of stylistic creation in a subculture. … The new meanings emerge because the "bits" which had been borrowed or revived were brought together into a new and distinctive stylistic *ensemble*: but also because the symbolic objects—dress,

> appearance, language, ritual occasions, styles of interaction, music—were made to form a *unity* with the group's relations, situation, experiences: the crystallization in an expressive form, which then defines the group's public identity (110).

Therefore, through the effort and thought put into assembling specific items, the individuals described in this article have been able to employ signification to their advantage.

Attire is one vehicle through which ideas and messages can be communicated through signification. But any object or product can be applied to perform the same function. The analyses by Kobena Mercer and Sarah Thornton provide further examples of other applications of signification and the messages they can communicate. Kobena Mercer discusses how hair can be a medium to make social statements through the methods of grooming and styling. In her essay "Black Hair/Style Politics," Mercer considers Black hairstyling and identifies it as an art form or aesthetic solution. Mercer argues that hair has been used by Black people to express their responses to the experience of racial oppression (34). Sarah Thornton, in her book *Club Cultures*, identifies how people's choices of music reflect which social groups they belong to and what values they uphold. All these examples by Hebdige, Clarke *et al.*, Mercer, and Thornton demonstrate how any individual has access to resources that can be used as symbols to communicate ideas.

The symbolic meaning of goods is a critical concept for this study as it begins to reveal how specialty retailers are involved in processes of socializing. As the work of these retailers involves providing a very select range of goods, the concept of

signification helps identify how retailers use these goods as symbols to communicate with, while also offering them to consumers as means for self-expression.

The previously mentioned examples illustrate people's ongoing efforts and practices of expressing themselves, their social affiliations, and their choices of lifestyle. Mike Featherstone, a sociologist and cultural theorist, explains these efforts as resulting from an "aestheticization of reality." In his book *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism,* Featherstone describes how our current society is experiencing an aestheticization of reality, which places a new importance on lifestyle. His argument is derived from an assessment of several theories about the postmodern environment and about consumer culture. In his discussion of the postmodern world, Featherstone acknowledges the prominence of hyper sign production in Western society, and society's resulting deregulation. He describes this deregulation as a breakdown of social hierarchies and an instability of social divisions. Featherstone specifies that the profusion of information and images, which cannot be stabilized into a system of meaning, impresses its instability into the social realm. However Featherstone stops short of arriving at the same conclusion of other postmodern theorists, which is a society reduced to chaos. Instead he argues that society and the ways in which people function have molded to the sign. Therefore, through their use of symbols, individuals find the liberty and flexibility to create meaning and achieve social mobility.

Featherstone's theory of an "aestheticization of reality" thus identifies individuals in the postmodern world as becoming symbolically aware, media savvy, and driven to improve their lives. The foundation for this argument is situated in an acknowledgement that people are socially conscious and that they are consumers who make rational

purchasing decisions. Consuming no longer revolves solely around the practical use of goods, but increasingly includes the acquisition of symbols to make meaning. Featherstone argues that the postmodern environment has fostered this consciousness of lifestyle and a greater self-awareness in general. He states that in this environment,

> Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblages of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle (86).

By highlighting the use of commodities as symbols or markers to reflect a particular lifestyle, Featherstone's work identifies the social utility and communicative role that commodities play.

To understand the role of retailers in this progression towards greater lifestyle consumption, we can refer to the work of the social and cultural theorists Paul du Gay, Louise Crewe, Jonathan Beaverstock, Sharon Zukin, and Angela McRobbie. In each of their essays, these authors specifically identify how retailers play an important role in pushing consumer culture towards a greater focus on lifestyle, and how they simultaneously encourage a greater dependency on goods for projecting messages about lifestyle.

Paul du Gay, in his essay "Numbers and Souls: Retailing and the De-differentiation of Economy and Culture," describes how retailers were the primary conductors in the transition of consumer culture from Fordism to Post-Fordism. Du Gay, a sociologist, writer, and cultural critic, describes this transition as a shift from mass

production in the age of Fordism (1940s to 1960s) to a greater focus on production flexibility and specialized consumption in the Post-Fordist age. Du Gay explores this idea by identifying the relevance of "signification":

> the new regime of accumulation is simultaneously a "regime of signification." That is, "a greater and greater proportion of all goods produced comprises cultural goods." Correspondingly, consumption practices are increasingly style and "sign value" oriented, rather than function and "use value" focused (3).

Therefore, as products moved away from mass production and towards specialization, consumers similarly moved towards a greater appreciation of individuality and its reflection through the goods they possess. By emphasizing the symbolic value of commodities, and highlighting their cultural meaning rather than their functional utility, retailers have redefined the concept of value in consumer culture. Retailers have cultivated an appreciation for the symbolic value of goods, and have provided new tools for self-expression. Moreover, by offering fixed, open locations that provide these tools, retailers also provide a space for social interaction and an opportunity for people to make social and cultural meanings. This retailer function is exemplified in the work of Louise Crewe and Jonathan Beaverstock, Sharon Zukin, and Angela McRobbie.

In their analysis of the Lace Market, a popular shopping district in Nottingham, England, Crewe and Beaverstock explore how retailers and shoppers collaborate in their desire for a unique identity. Their essay "Fashioning the City: Cultures of Consumption in Contemporary Urban Spaces" describes how "such new urbanities display a preference for products which are not franchised and/or nationally ubiquitous but seek instead niche markets offering unique, exotic or alternative products" (14). These authors draw their

argument from a recognition of the transition towards a greater lifestyle focus within the consumer market. Their essay describes the Lace Market's retail stores as a source for unique goods that are symbolically meaningful. This is a prime example of how retail stores play a central role in the shift towards lifestyle consumption.

Crewe and Beaverstock's analysis of the Lace Market suggests the relevance of specialization in the social activity of retailers. Sharon Zukin's essay "Shopping" continues where they leave off, and considers the cultural meaning or social value of this activity. Zukin's analysis incorporates a discussion of the types of stores that consumers engage with. She shows how starting in the 1960s, small specialty stores identified as "boutiques" rose in prominence. Zukin describes how this type of store gained visibility after the decline of department stores in the 1940s, and after the introduction of discount stores in the 1950s. She specifies that these boutiques catered to an emerging market of youths and young adult consumers by offering a small range of specialized products. As Zukin elaborates,

> During these years of cultural ferment, shopping became a vehicle for differentiating age groups and developing and diffusing "lifestyle," at least in the form of commodities that could be grouped together to suggest a common approach to life. Not just buying the products, but shopping in different kinds of stores became a form of peer groups' self-expression ("Shopping").

Therefore, as boutiques provide tools with which to communicate, they support and provide the means for the creation of cultural statements.

To have a discussion about consumer culture, we must consider the influential power of consumers in relation to retailers. Consumers are crucial players in the market

as they make the final decision regarding what is purchased, and thus what is supported through their financial investment. However, their power is inevitably constrained by what is available to purchase. This is where the power of retailers becomes apparent. By selecting the products that are available for consumers to possess and express themselves with, retailers construct the parameters for consumer agency, while exercising their own agency. Thus a critical factor in the retailer's ability to engage socially is the opportunity they have to select their store's commodities.

A retailer's goods represent a small segment from the broad range of goods manufactured. For specialty stores, the goods they provide reflect an even smaller portion of this total. Making a selection of what commodities to carry from the range of choices available is therefore a conscious decision. The selection determines the type of stores the retailers will manage, which consumers they will appeal to, and what kinds of messages or ideas they will communicate. As this thesis argues, specialty retailers have a social relevance, and their ability to select goods reveals this.

Angela McRobbie, in her essay "*S*econd-Hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket," discusses how retailers are social players. She analyzes shopping, the act of choosing and buying, within the framework of youth cultures of resistance. More specifically, she examines the ragmarkets and second-hand shops. McRobbie's assessment of these markets and shops highlights their importance as spaces for social interaction. Through providing a place where people can gather and interact, retailers enable opportunities for cultural development as well as the expansion of social relations. Contrasting second-hand stores with department stores, McRobbie describes second-hand stores as thriving on values of familiarity, community, and personal exchange (135). She

similarly establishes a dichotomy between the products of these retro retailers and "high street fashion" in order to emphasize a separation between subculture and mainstream. This separation between subculture and mainstream is an underlying theme in her analysis. A key aspect of McRobbie's work is her consideration of the entrepreneur. She shows how retail entrepreneurs make a conscientious investment in subcultural communities via their role as retail store owners.

The essays of du Gay, Crewe, Beaverstock, Zukin, and McRobbie reinforce the notion that the work of retailers has a social impact. These conclusions were based on their recognition of the retailers' use of symbols and signification, and the value they place on signifying. The authors note that commodities can be seen as symbols, and are used to communicate messages of self-expression. By making these expressions, people can publicly support and reinforce ideas, communities, cultures, etc., thereby aligning themselves with some members of society, while separating themselves from others.

McRobbie's social perspective on the retailers' work and her incorporation of the concept "subculture" are especially relevant to my study. She highlights the cultural importance of the spaces and goods that specialty retailers provide, and emphasizes the centrality of social interaction to their work. By identifying the value of space and goods while also reinforcing a binary relationship between mainstream and subculture, McRobbie's analysis illustrates how retailers can be affiliated with subcultures and influence their development. In this thesis, I would like to further explore the social relationships between retailers and subcultural participants. But first, an examination of the concept of "subculture" will be useful to help identify the possible connections.

The Formation of Subcultures

The retail stores selected for this study were chosen because they each cater to specific target markets that possess unique tastes. As these tastes are unique, they do not appear to belong to a mass culture, but rather reflect subcultures. This target group of stores occupies a very small portion of the consumer market, and yet the store owners in this study purposely chose to serve those very small markets. The ability of these owners to achieve success through appealing to very particular groups of customers was one of the reasons why they were selected for this research. But in order to confirm whether or not the retailers in this study do in fact engage with subcultures, an analysis of subcultural theories will be necessary to find the notable social characteristics of subcultures. These characteristics will provide reference points with which to examine the activities of the retailers, and to find commonalities as evidence of their subcultural engagement.

The concept of "subculture" has generally included the notion of individuals coming together to form social groups bound by similar backgrounds, interests, or preferences. This grouping binds like-minded people, and provides members with the sense of support and acceptance that they may not receive from those who do not share their perspectives or preferences. Subcultures, like any cultural groups, possess particular belief systems that frame their perspectives and guide their actions. Clarke *et al.* describe subcultures as "focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces, etc., which significantly differentiate [the subculture] from the wider culture" (100).

The majority of subcultural theorists focus primarily on the value of subcultures for individuals in their personal struggles for social acceptance and identity. In these

analyses emphasis has been placed on the unity of the subcultural group and its deviation from a larger, dominant culture, often referred to as the norm or the "mainstream." However, Nancy MacDonald and Sarah Thornton are two subcultural theorists who specifically consider the social organization within subcultures. They reflect on the complexity of the individual's identity and the importance of social recognition amongst his or her peers within a subculture group. Although MacDonald and Thornton acknowledge the distinction and separateness of subcultures, these authors emphasize the self-created aspect of subcultural identity, and how subcultures come to *depend* on distinction from the mainstream.

In a section of her book *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity*, MacDonald discusses the idea of a dominant or "mainstream" culture. She argues that "The social landscape does not appear to boast a group which fits this ["mainstream"] description. What it yields instead is a series of disparate groups which, like "subcultures," each express their own values, styles and ways of life" (151). Based on this argument, a more accurate understanding of the subculture would be to identify it as a social group that perceives or portrays itself as standing apart from other cultural groups, and having defined parameters. MacDonald states, that "definition is thus made possible, but it must come from the members themselves" (152). Thus MacDonald stresses the self-created aspect of the group's formation and identity.

Sarah Thornton, a researcher and writer in the field of Subcultural Studies, makes a similar argument. In her book *Club Cultures*, she analyzes British youth cultures whose social formation revolves around music and clubs. Thornton establishes that the discourses of dance cultures are forms of ideology, which fulfill specific cultural agendas

of their beholders (10). This touches on the conscious self-construction that MacDonald identifies. Thornton furthers this insight by arguing that subcultural ideologies "are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass" (10). Thornton therefore recognizes the importance of distinction for the formation of subcultures. She also emphasizes the effectiveness of distinction as a method for reinforcing the subculture's values and socially empowering its members. As Thornton succinctly states: "Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*" (10).

Thornton examines three principal overarching distinctions, and exposes the importance of language, particularly of categories and labels. These distinctions are 1) the authentic versus the phony, 2) the "hip" versus the "mainstream," and 3) the "underground" versus "the media." Through these kinds of distinction, the group's tastes, ideologies, and identity are defined and circulated. Thornton especially highlights the binary nature of distinction which subcultures create. She asserts that defining what one is *not* reveals what one *is*:

> Within club worlds, there is much less consensus about what's hip than what's not. Although most clubbers and ravers characterize their own crowd as missed or impossible to classify, they are generally happy to identify a homogenous crowd to which they don't belong. And while there are many "other" scenes, most clubbers and ravers see themselves in opposition to the "mainstream" (99).

In this quote Thornton specifically singles out the importance of a binary relationship to the "mainstream" for the youth cultures. She continues by clarifying that the

"mainstream" is an "imagined other." Both MacDonald and Thornton problematize the presence of a mainstream or cultural norm, which subcultural groups are typically recognized as challenging. This notion has been projected as a cultural point of reference with which subcultural groups hinge their perceptions of value and flesh out their identity.

The work of both Thornton and MacDonald aligns with the other subcultural studies which emphasize the importance of distinction. However Thornton and MacDonald deviate from other studies by recognizing how the construction of binary relationships helps to define the subculture. These authors specifically identify the "mainstream" as a tool employed to achieve a sense of subcultural collectivity, and with this, a sense of identity and self-worth. The arguments made by both MacDonald and Thornton are pivotal for my research, as they identify key characteristics in how subcultures socialize and organize. Additionally, the notion of self-creation indicates an entry point and an opportunity for retailers to influence these social groups. Identity and self-worth are important to note because, as will become apparent from a deeper discussion of Thornton's work, these concepts are connected with social status. Thus for retail stores, their capacity to influence people's sense of identity and self-worth through their retail activities will inevitably have a social impact.

Thornton's research is primarily focused on individual identity rather than collective identity. Instead of discussing the unity that binds the subcultural members together, she reveals the importance of social ordering within each cultural group. Her analysis succeeds in bringing recognition to the complex relationships that exist within subcultures. In her analysis of subcultural identity, Thornton reveals the hierarchies

subcultural members negotiate and the importance of the club as a venue for these negotiations.

Thornton defines club cultures as specifically taste cultures that are based on shared preferences for music, media, and socializing with similar people. She argues that as a result,

> [the subculture] builds, in turn, further affinities, socializing participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture … Crucially, club cultures embrace their hierarchies of what is authentic and legitimate in popular culture—embodied understanding of which can make one "hip" (3).

Identifying the need to socialize participants reveals that members are taught one preferred cultural ideology. This is a particularly critical observation, as it suggests that subcultural members do not naturally possess the exact same beliefs or dispositions. In order for the individual to become accepted into the group and gain the recognition of their peers, they need to adopt the ideology upheld by that particular subcultural group.

Thornton describes how individual negotiations for status are made through the possession of goods, knowledge, or characteristics that are recognized and valued by the group. The term Thornton uses to describe this social currency is "subcultural capital." Within club cultures, Thornton specifies that the possession of subcultural capital can be expressed through taste in music, forms of dance, styles of clothing, and specialized language. Each subculture has its own specific selection of symbolic goods or texts, which can be recognized as subcultural capital and enables acceptance and ascension within the group. It is through the ideas they communicate with the cultural capital they

possess, or lack, that participants situate themselves within the subculture and the organization of its members.

Clubs, as physical places, play an important role in this socializing process. These are spaces separated from the greater society, which allow culturally relevant meanings, values, and standards to be negotiated, established, and practiced. Retail stores are also physical spaces, and can potentially have the same relevance to a social group. If the owners allow and encourage the opportunity for socializing to take place, they are inevitably taking part in the communication of ideas and the organization of a social group. This will be important to identify in my case studies.

An important idea to recognize about signification is that making meaning through the use of symbols depends on relationalism. Reflecting one's lifestyle and negotiating one's self through signification is only possible, effective, and meaningful when it is recognized by another individual, and in relation to other ideals or concepts. Therefore one's social position is identified by a measurement of the subcultural capital one may or may not possess in comparison to those who are members of the subculture, as well as to those who are not.

As specialty retail stores provide symbolically meaningful goods, identifying their goods as subcultural capital will help us to see the social relevance of their work. This concept facilitates an understanding of how the provision of subcultural capital can be beneficial for the retailer, why it appeals to their patrons, and what its social impact may be.

Thornton's concept of subcultural capital is derived from the concept of "capital" as described by Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, in his book *Distinction*. Thornton

relied quite heavily on Bourdieu's work when developing her theoretical framework for *Club Cultures*. Bourdieu, who conducted his research during the 1960s and 70s, was very aware of the presence of a class hierarchy in France. Bourdieu defines "capital" as the actual resources and powers that an individual can draw from in order to negotiate a higher placement in the social hierarchy. He specifies three fundamental dimensions of capital with which people negotiate their position: economic, social, and cultural.

Economic capital refers to money and property, which are immediate sources of power and prestige. Social capital refers to the contacts and networks of relations an individual has access to. The status and the resources of one's contacts are thus transferred to the individual, which indirectly provide that individual with power. Finally, Bourdieu states that cultural capital refers to the form of cultural goods that is displayed through the appearance and disposition of the individual, and which can be embodied (internalized) or objectified ("Forms of Capital" 98). The power derived from this particular form of capital is dependent on the possessors' cultural competence and their investment in acquiring it. Bourdieu further explains that any form of cultural competence derives its value from its scarcity. Therefore, the possession of this valuable competence requires maintenance—a continuous effort to advance one's knowledge, relations, and possessions in order to continue one's social ascension.

Bourdieu emphasizes the primacy of economic capital, and measures the value of other forms of capital based on the degree to which they can be converted to economic capital. However, he makes an exception for cultural capital, arguing that it functions independently of money and property. Cultural capital can come in any form. Its value is determined by the common appreciation that cultural participants have for specific goods.

As a result, cultural capital evades financial determination, and provides the means through which individuals who lack economic capital can negotiate power.

As the subjects in this study are retail stores, economic capital is inevitably important. In order to participate in consumer culture, the participants require income to acquire goods. However this research attempts to show the social relations that already exist, or are being influenced and developed by the activities of specialty retailers. Therefore, to facilitate an analysis that focuses on the social and cultural implications of these activities, this study aims to move beyond the restrictions of viewing power as income only. Doing this will engender an awareness of the various ways in which specialty retailers may influence relationships and establish their relevance to society.

Understanding Social Organization through Taste

The social theory of taste draws together several of the key concepts in this thesis: social investment, status, culture, and capital. Both Bourdieu and Thornton make these connections in their respective books *Distinction* and *Club Cultures*. These theorists argue that taste is the primary characteristic through which one can understand the organization of society and the social relations between individuals or amongst groups. Both Bourdieu and Thornton highlight how taste is reflected through signs such as attire, language, knowledge, and goods. Therefore, by recognizing goods as indicative of taste, goods have the potential to be cultural capital. The specific goods must be identified by the social group as reflecting their taste.

Bourdieu argues that taste is an indication of an individual's social standing and class association. Bourdieu describes how taste is guided by one's disposition. In turn,

one's disposition is informed by one's environment through multiple frames, such as income, education, and location. At a very basic level, everyone shares a similar existence, but the specifics of each person's existence vary, which creates differences among dispositions. Taste, as Bourdieu explains, reflects these differential deviations; it reflects the factors that define it. The reflections of these differences are then interpreted and evaluated in order to determine the lifestyles, group associations, and the social positions of other individuals (*Distinction* 170).

Bourdieu's research is focused on a specific social group he identifies as the "new petit bourgeoisie," and on the class divisions that distinguish this group from others. He describes this group's efforts "to stand aloof from the tastes and values most clearly associated with the established bourgeoisie and the working class." Bourdieu argues that this distinction is a crucial thrust in the petite bourgeoisie's effort to "recover their lost class" (*Distinction* 362). He explains that the pretension to distinction creates an exclusive social network that provides advantages for its members. These advantages include a sense of belonging, greater access to cultural goods, and incentives for one's contact with groups or specific individuals who are also culturally favoured (*Distinction* 363).

The new petite bourgeoisie and their efforts to create distinction for their class is comparable to subcultures and their efforts to create distinction for their culture. Both social groups thrive and are empowered by standing apart from more established groups. From this perspective, expressions of taste can be understood as a structuring mechanism that is consciously employed by social agents. Relativity is critical to keep in mind here. The effectiveness of taste operates through its relation to other expressions of taste, and

particularly to the negation of these tastes (*Distinction* 56). Therefore taste can bring people together while simultaneously creating divisions from others.

In a section of his text Bourdieu specifically addresses the correspondence between goods production and taste production. Here he makes a point that is particularly crucial for this research:

> The field of production, which clearly could not function if it could not count on already existing tastes, more or less strong propensities to consume more or less clearly defined goods, enables taste to be realized by offering it, at each moment, the universe of cultural goods as a system of stylistic possibles from which it can select the system of stylistic features constituting lifestyle (*Distinction* 230).

Bourdieu argues that taste is not *created* by producers and subsequently absorbed by consumers. Taste already exists, and is possessed by consumers. However it becomes realized, identified, and articulated through the production of goods. Although Bourdieu considers the production of goods, I would also add the work of retailers and other providers of goods and services to this equation. These individuals are significant, as they make items available that appeal to consumers and reflect taste.

As Bourdieu states, a cultural product is a constituted taste—a taste that has been raised from a vague idea, experience or desire, to a fully realized product (*Distinction* 231). By providing symbolic goods that are culturally meaningful, specialty retailers actively articulate tastes. Helping to realize a particular taste facilitates the ability of consumers, who are social agents, to express themselves—their preferences, ideals, cultural affiliations, etc. Specialty retailers can therefore provide the tools for individuals to socially empower themselves. Through their efforts, one can argue that retailers play a

critical role in the social positioning of individuals in the overall organization of the social group to which they belong.

Considering the arguments cited above, the specific taste a retailer decides to support deserves consideration. The decision is not random. In the case of specialty stores, their specializations would appear to be areas where the owners possess expert knowledge and strong preferences for. The types of goods that retailers make available to consumers provide insight into which consumers, tastes, and social groups they appeal to. More importantly for this paper, the goods that retailer provide are revealing of the store's social associations and impact. The concept of the "cultural intermediary" will be key for this discussion and analysis.

The Role of the Cultural Intermediary

Bourdieu introduces the term "cultural intermediary" in his book *Distinction.* He identifies this role as an occupation, but does not explicitly state which occupations would qualify as cultural intermediaries. Instead, Bourdieu describes the characteristics of the cultural intermediary position. He uses this concept to help describe the disposition and social positioning of the new petite bourgeoisie—a particular upper class social group that was situated below the established bourgeois, but above the working class. Furthermore, Bourdieu uses the concept of cultural intermediary to support his recognition of this particular social class's efforts to advance their status.

While discussing the relevance of cultural intermediary work for the new petite bourgeoisie, Bourdieu reincorporates the idea of capital. He argues that the occupation of cultural intermediary allows the new petite bourgeoisie to utilize and maximize the

capital they possess to gain social recognition and to advance in the hierarchy. Bourdieu identifies that the new petite bourgeoisie possesses a great amount of cultural and social capital. However, in comparison to the established bourgeois, the new petite bourgeoisie lacks educational capital. Bourdieu suggests that this is detrimental, as educational capital is an important indicator of social status. Therefore, in order to make up for this deficiency, the new petite bourgeoisie emphasize the superiority and desirability of what they do possess, and of the achievements that are within their grasp. Bourdieu describes the attitude behind this strategy:

> Their ambivalent relationship with the educational system, inducing a sense of complicity with every form of symbolic defiance, inclines them to welcome all the forms of culture which are, provisionally at least, on the lower boundaries of legitimate … as a challenge to legitimate culture; but they often bring into these regions disdain by the educational establishment an erudite, even "academic" disposition which is inspired by a clear intention of rehabilitation, the cultural equivalent of the restoration strategies which define their occupational project (*Distinction* 360).

The notion of defiance is important to highlight. The defiance Bourdieu speaks of is the challenge the new petite bourgeoisie poses to the current cultural order and the bourgeoisie class. By changing that which is perceived as valuable, the social landscape is also adjusted to elevate those who possess these valuable characteristics, objects, etc. However, although the new petite bourgeoisie attempts to alter the factors that organize society through the work of cultural intermediaries, they still maintain the structures of

hierarchical organization. Thus the cultural intermediary can be said to be invested in the re-establishing and extending of culture (*Distinction* 357).

Bourdieu's reference to "symbolic defiance" touches on the emphasis he places on symbols and their relevance for the social objectives of the new petite bourgeoisie. He states:

> The cultural intermediary comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (359). As signification is a method of constructing messages and communicating ideas, it is important to emphasize the ability to select symbols which is inherent in the work of a cultural intermediary (*Distinction* 361).

As Bourdieu states, the work of the cultural intermediary is "socially inculcated." The expression of taste through signification communicates the preferences, background, and social status of the possessor. These expressions also create cultural meanings and support social negotiations. With the use of symbols and signification, cultural intermediaries can use their occupations to support the social groups they are associated with and create meanings that are relevant to them.

It is important to restate that taste is not necessarily being created. Taste is neither natural nor free floating, but rather it is something bound to habitus. Cultural intermediaries help *realize* taste through its articulation. In realizing taste and providing symbolically valuable and meaningful goods, cultural intermediaries are active in the presentation and valuation of what they have to offer. Thus the roles and values of the

cultural intermediaries and their products are caught up in the process of self-validation and self-maintenance.

The identification of value and the making of meaning are especially pronounced in an occupation like that of a specialty retail store owner. Keeping in mind the prominence of lifestyle consumption in the consumer market today, the work of specialty retailers can be recognized as reflecting that of a cultural intermediary as they engage in the provision of symbolic goods and services. Identifying these retailers as cultural intermediaries allows an appreciation of this occupation as neither producer nor consumer in the traditional market sense. Rather, specialty retailers are *both* producers and consumers in their function as mediators. The activities of specialty retailers are located between manufacturers and consumers in that they select specific goods from manufacturers, and present this specialized selection for end-users to purchase. However, and more importantly for this research, retailers can also be seen as producers and consumers of meaning.

Within this framework of understanding, specialty retailers can be considered social actors who are aiming to negotiate their social position, the legitimacy of the culture they are affiliated with, and their way of life. Through the act of realizing taste and making symbolic and culturally meaningful goods available for consumers to express themselves with, specialty retailers are supporting a particular taste and promoting its value. In his discussion of cultural intermediaries and their work of re-establishing culture through signification, Bourdieu emphasizes that these people are primarily invested in establishing *their* tastes and *their* social presence (360). Thus we can see how the work of the specialty retailer reflects these efforts.

David Wright, in his essay "Mediating Production and Consumption," discusses retail stores and, similar to this thesis, he considers their social impact. Wright also makes the connection between retailers and cultural intermediaries. He emphasizes that it is particularly the retailers' role in taking goods from manufacturers or producers and making them available to consumers for purchase that enables their impact as cultural intermediaries. Wright describes this work as "mediating," and identifies its impact as follows:

> the process of "mediation" is also a process of reproduction of inequalities of cultural capital and relations of power …Whilst the rise of the cultural industries, and the culturalization of other types of industry relies on the opening up of new fields of legitimization, what is more significant is not that cultural intermediaries engage in this type of opening up, but that they are able to monopolize these processes (4).

This quote reveals that the impact made by retail stores as cultural intermediaries involves the reproduction of a social hierarchy. The desire to advance one's social status is central to this process, and the retailer's agency and conscious social influence can be recognized particularly in Wright's idea of monopolization. Through the purposeful use of taste and distinction as measures with which retailers create value for a particular culture or lifestyle, these retailers manipulate social relations and assert their own position as the top of the hierarchy.

Through the idea of cultural intermediary, I will assess the symbolic meanings and social implications of the specialty retailers' work. This will include an analysis of the products the retailers carry, the presentation of their stores, and the tastes these

commodities reflect. As stated earlier, the stores featured in this study are chosen because they are specialty stores that have made a decision to appeal to very specific tastes. Recognizing the unique quality of the tastes they are appealing to, they have emphasized the perception of these tastes as subcultural. A central task of this paper is to investigate what kinds of subcultural impressions these retailers make through their signifying efforts. To assist with this subcultural analysis, I will rely on the ideas of Nancy MacDonald and Sarah Thornton as discussed earlier. MacDonald's definition of subculture, which is based on cultural separation and a dependence on distinction, will be incorporated as well as Thornton's emphasis on binary distinctions to achieve a sense of self. With this framework, I will be able to analyze the symbolic meaning of the various activities and expressions made by these retailers.

As this study is grounded in the recognition of social hierarchies in society and of people's desires for social recognition, the overall topic of discussion will be how the activities of specialty retailers affect people's abilities to negotiate their social positions. Understanding the symbolic value and meaning of the goods and services which the retailers provide will be reference points for this assessment. Before discussing my data and analysis however, the following chapter will begin by providing an illustration of the setting in which my study takes place. I will begin by describing the environment of these retail stores, in order to contextualize the information and then include a description of my methodology.

Chapter Two: Research Context and Methodology

The location and social context of the retail stores in this study are important to consider. Identifying their working environment will foster a better understanding of their activities as retail stores, as well as their social relevance. This chapter begins with a description of the city in which **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records**, and **Come As You Are** are located, which includes its social, cultural, and consumer environment. This is followed by an introduction to the sample group of stores and an account of how they were chosen. Finally, the chapter will end with a discussion of the methodology this research has employed.

Social Context

The city's municipal website (www.toronto.ca) identifies Toronto as the largest city in Canada, and home to over two and a half million people. The city's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) totals $127 billion, which comprises 11% of Canada's overall GDP. The retail industry is very important for Toronto, and this is reflected in a number of municipal and national statistical reports. The retail sector generates about 37% of Toronto's annual GDP, or $47 billion ("Toronto—An Overview"). According to one of the more recent reports on consumption from Statistics Canada (2007), consumer spending was the primary contributor to economic growth in the country. The retail sector was a major reason for recent growth in the Canadian economy, as retail sales advanced 5.6% in 2007 ("Retails Competing for Market Share"). Then in 2008, the sale of goods and services increased by 3.4% over 2007 ("Retail Trade"). In Toronto, the retail and sales industry is one of its largest and most lucrative sectors. All these statistics

show the significant contributions retail stores make towards sustaining the economy. Additionally, these reports reveal the importance and the dependence we place on the work of retailers.

Toronto is also recognized for another important characteristic but in this instance it is in relation to its social landscape: diversity. The social diversity of a location has an impact on its development as well as the development of its society. Diversity influences culture, taste, lifestyle, the organization of individuals, and as Sharon Zukin discusses, the economy.

In her essay "Urban Lifestyles," Zukin considers the importance of diversity within the context of urban lifestyles and economic development in cities. She states that over the past 30 years the value of diversity has risen, particularly due to a growth in cultural production and consumption. As individuals have become more concerned with status and with expressing themselves through their lifestyles, strategies for economic development have increasingly embraced and championed diversity. Zukin states that

> Elected officials who, in the 1960s, might have criticized immigrants and non-traditional living arrangements, now consciously market the city's diverse opportunities for cultural consumption … They also welcome the employment offered by new culture industries and expanding cultural institutions—as part of the cities' new comparative advantage in the "symbolic economy" (836–837).

Toronto shows signs of adopting this strategy. A downloadable pamphlet intended for business investors on the Toronto.ca website highlights diversity repeatedly. The pamphlet describes the city as "Canada's business centre and one of the three leading urban economies on the continent, Toronto is defined by its diversity." With regard to the

workforce, "Toronto is home to one-sixth of Canada's labour force. Torontonians are ethnically diverse, multilingual (speaking 100+ languages), highly skilled and well educated, taking advantage of three local universities and numerous colleges" ("Toronto: A Diversified Economy"). From these descriptions, Toronto can be seen as a city that exemplifies the developments Zukin affirms.

It is clear that cultural diversity is a valuable, favourable, and nurtured characteristic of Toronto. As retail stores are prominent in society and significant for the economy, diversity will also play a part in the function and success of retail business. In order for a retail store to be successful, it must offer goods or services that are relevant to the consumer market it serves. Therefore understanding the diversity of Toronto's consumer market will shed light on the types of retail work that have potential for success.

Toronto has been hailed as the most diversified economy of any city in North America, and as one of the most ethnically diverse cities ("Toronto: A Diversified Economy"). Stats Canada supports this claim by listing at least ten ethnic groups other than "Canadian" that make up substantial portions of Toronto's population. These include Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, South East Asian, Arab, West Asian, Korean, and Japanese. Together, these groups comprise over 44% of the city's population ("Visible Minority Status"). Ethnicity (along with age, education, occupation, and income) is one of the dimensions of diversity that these official reports affirm.

Beyond from these reports, diversity can be recognized from the various communities that are dispersed throughout the city. There are a number of neighbourhoods representing different ethnic cultures, such as Chinatown, Greektown,

Little Italy, and Little Jamaica. Similarly, taste cultures are recognizable in neighbourhoods such as Yorkville, which caters to luxury item consumers, and Kensington Market, which supports a Bohemian lifestyle.

These cultural groups and markets all coexist in the same city. Yet the separation from one culture to another is strikingly apparent. Each culture is distinct and has both cultural and spatial parameters to separate its members from others. It is apparent that each of these groups tend to reinforce its presence in society. The social landscape of Toronto therefore demonstrates the coexistence of numerous cultural groups that each possess specific preferences and lifestyles.

As Bourdieu and Thornton explain in their respective books *Distinction* and *Club Cultures*, the expression of one's identity involves an effort to align one's self with a specific group, while separating from others. Both these authors highlight the presence of social hierarchies in society, and the pervasive desire of individuals to negotiate improved social positions for themselves. If we apply these ideas to Toronto (recognizing that there are numerous lines of division) we can see that the city has numerous hierarchies that coexist and overlap with one another. In a city as diverse as Toronto, the social system is comprised of networks of social groups and hierarchies. As a result, we can recognize that the social organization found in this city and many that are similar, is a complex, multilayered system. The greater the diversity of a city, the greater the number of social groups, which increase the complexity of the city's social organization.

This thesis will focus on one particular form of social organization in the city, the organization of subcultures. The selected three specialty retailers are all engaged in supporting perceived subcultural groups. As this research is concerned with the social

relevance and impact of specialty stores, simplifying the levels of diversity to focus primarily on cultural diversity will provide clearer results. These results will provide specific information on the ways these retailers operate, what roles they play in shaping local subcultures, what relationships they develop, and how the social groups they support are organized.

The statistics noted at the beginning of this chapter revealed that retail stores are important establishments for the economic viability of Toronto. As we consider the function of retailers and their importance we will keep in mind the presence of social hierarchies and the pervasive desire for status. The prominence of retailers suggests their involvement in negotiations for social status and their influence in the development of social relations. As there are a number of distinct social groups in Toronto, this suggests that retailers play a role in maintaining these groups and supporting their differentiation from others. This is the hypothesis that the thesis will test.

Sample Group

This research is concerned with the social role of specialty retailers. To assess the social significance of retail store owners, a sample of three stores will be presented. These three retail stores are **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records,** and **Come As You Are (CAYA)**. These stores are all small, privately-owned specialty retail businesses located in the core of downtown Toronto.

The retail trade is the third largest industry in Toronto, following the "Manufacturing" and "Professional, Scientific and Technical Services" industries. The retail trade also holds third position in the particular city wards where **The Bombshelter**,

Cosmos Records, and **CAYA** reside ("2006 City of Toronto Ward Profiles: Ward 19", and "2006 City of Toronto Ward Profiles: Ward 20"). **The Bombshelter** is located on Spadina Avenue at Queen Street, which places it in Ward 19. The parameters of Ward 19 include Dupont Street to the North, University Avenue to the East, Lakeshore Boulevard to the South, and Bathurst Street to the West. **Cosmos Records** and **CAYA** are both on Queen Street just west of Bathurst Avenue, which position them in Ward 20. Again, Dupont is to the North and Lakeshore is South, however this ward has Bathurst to the East and extends to Dovercourt Road on the West. Additionally, it is important to note that Queen Street, from Yonge Street to Shaw Street, is a major visible shopping strip in Toronto and especially the section between Yonge and Bathurst. The street is saturated with retail stores and is heavily traversed by consumers. The importance of the retail trade in both Wards 19 and 20, and on Queen Street, make the locations of **the Bombshelter**, **Cosmos,** and **CAYA** excellent places for stores as it draws a high volume of passers-by.

The selection of these three stores was initially based on the appeal of one store. It was **The Bombshelter** that inspired this research. This store is appealing because of its success as a business and its connection with a group of consumers, who together can be perceived as forming a "subculture." **The Bombshelter** set the criteria that guided the sample selection, as indications of social involvement were first noticed through Zion and his store. Other retailers with a similar business model and a similar level of social activity were then looked for. The selected stores all appeared to possess the following characteristics: they are independent, highly specialized, well established, and committed to specific "subcultural" tastes. Selecting similar stores and then analyzing their methods

of signification, as well as the messages they communicate, will allow me to determine if they share a common motivation, objective, or strategy, and what their potential social relevance might be.

Although the stores I am studying are located in Toronto, the analysis of independent specialty stores is relevant beyond this location. These types of stores are not unique to Toronto, but can be found in many major cities. Conducting research in one major city heeds results that provide revealing information about the economic and social climate. Therefore the results of this study could be informative for other cities similar to Toronto. My research highlights the importance of retail stores from an economic standpoint, but it also raises questions about what other impact retail stores can have. The retailers in this study specialize in products they perceive as pertinent to "subcultures," which indicates a social and cultural investment through their work. Therefore understanding how the retailers in these case studies function provides insights into other areas where their influence can be felt, including the social ramifications of their activities.

In choosing "established" businesses, I have placed a priority on stores with proven longevity. The following information from Statistics Canada (2006) illustrates the intense competition in the consumer market and the difficulty for a retailer to maintain his or her business:

> During this period, the number of businesses grew, on average, by 9,300 on a yearly basis. However, the number of new firms that started to operate each year averaged 138,100, i.e., almost 15 times the net increases in businesses observed during the period. The number of deaths averaged 128,800. … Of all firms that

> were born in the 1990s, roughly one-quarter ceased to operate within the first two years. About 36% survived 5 years or more and only one-fifth were still in operation after 10 years ("Business Dynamics in Canada").

One can argue that as the population in Toronto has risen and the economic activity of the city has increased, the retail sector and its rate of competition has grown in tandem.

In today's consumer environment, maintaining a business, let alone achieving success, is a difficult task. Having one's business revolve around providing specific products that satisfy distinct tastes compounds the difficulty involved. This is the scenario for the specialty retailers in this study. **The Bombshelter** provides graffiti supplies such as spray paint in a variety of finishes and colours, paint markers, caps, graffiti books and magazines, etc. **Cosmos Records** sells used, often rare, vintage vinyl records for collectors. **Come As You Are (CAYA)** is a more widely appealing retail store, as it provides a variety of sex products and information resources on sexuality. However what makes **CAYA** truly specialized is the particular sentiments and ideas around sex and sexuality that they support. **CAYA** openly reinforces sex-positivity, and encourages a fun and open-minded perception of sexuality. Each of the stores selected are privately-owned, independent stores that have been active for over nine years, and have achieved their success though a unique, highly specialized focus. The success of their stores and the strategies they employ suggest trends in business and social development.

As these are stores with a specialty focus, the value of their goods is based on quality, rarity, and cultural relevance. Their products, therefore, go beyond basic functionality, and instead work on a symbolic level, where the meaningfulness of the product is its most important characteristic. As identified in Chapter One, consumers

today are increasingly guided by lifestyle decisions, and consequently the symbolic value of a product is especially important for shoppers. The consumers in today's market are concerned with the meaning of goods they purchase and what those goods are able to communicate. The symbolism that these stores employ and the meanings they transmit are therefore crucial points of reference for the social questions raised in this research. As the various forms of symbolic expression that retailers communicate with are diverse, I will incorporate multiple methods for gathering data.

Methodology and Ethics

The objective of this research is to understand the activities of retailers from a social perspective, and examine the potential influence retailers have on individuals and social relationships. Hence this study will include an ethnographic analysis of specialty retail stores, particularly concerning the work of the owners. In order to assess their social relevance through their interaction with consumers, ethnography provides the best tools.

Signification, specifically the expression of taste and distinction, is well recognized as a critical form of social engagement, and thus is important for this analysis. An examination of the social meanings involved in signification requires a collection of qualitative data. Questions of what tastes are displayed, what messages are communicated, and what potential social implications are involved, all require qualitative methods of inquiry. The process of signification incorporates symbols to make meaning. And for retailer store owners, the symbols they possess include their products, services, the styles of language they use, the ideas they discuss, their ways of behaving, and their approaches to presenting their stores. These symbolic features will be key areas for examination.

This research will initially assess each store individually as a case study. Each individual assessment will identify what specialized activities the retailers engage in and what their store objectives are. These case studies will then be compared to identify any trends, deviations, or inconsistencies. This comparative process will be discussed further at the end of this chapter. Interviews, observations, and textual analysis are the three methods employed in this research. The data acquired through these methods will be used for both the individual case study analysis, and the comparisons between case studies.

Interviewing was the initial method for gathering data. This was an effective method because it made use of the best available resource—the store owners themselves. Since this study attempts to understand the activities of retailers and their social relevance, the people who manage the stores are key informants for the relevant data. Interviewing was an excellent way to tap into this resource and gain specific information, as it allowed for questions that speak directly to the concerns central to this study. The information gained from these interviews provides greater insight into the activities of the store, and will direct the analyses.

Interviewing, however, is not a simple matter of asking questions and receiving answers. As Fontana and Frey describe in their essay "The Interview," it is a collaborative process that affects the information gained:

> Two or more people are involved in this process, and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort called *the interview*. The key here is the "active" nature of this process … that leads to a contextually bound and mutually created story—the interview (696).

The information gained is thus malleable and sensitive. It is dependent on numerous

factors such as the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, what questions are asked, how they are asked, and what information the individual interviewee is willing to provide. Therefore each step of this process needs to be considered.

From the outset it was important to consider how to approach the potential interview participants. Not only would the initial steps determine the possibility of attaining an interview, but the approach would also impact the information acquired from observations and textual analyses. As the chief interest was to understand how retailers socialize through signification, the various symbols they incorporate were critical points of analysis. The methods of observation and textual analysis were as important as the interviews in making these investigations. The information gained from all three methods was framed by my relationship with the store owners and how they perceived me and my research. To better illustrate the significance of access and the importance of the approach taken, it is helpful to describe the store owners as "gatekeepers."

Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are individuals who grant formal access to sought-after resources in a study. Campbell *et al.* describe them as those "that provide—directly or indirectly—access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional, or informational" (100). Miniechello *et al.* identify gatekeepers as "those individuals in an organization that have the power to withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research" (qtd. in De Laine 123). As this study centers around independent retail stores, the store owners are the central authority figures who can either provide or withhold access to information. The stores in my study are privately

owned, and as a result, authority is concentrated at the level of the store owner. Due to this concentration of power, the task of gaining access is easier on the one hand, because there are fewer gatekeepers to negotiate with. On the other hand, a one-level power structure also mounts pressure on the negotiations made with the one gatekeeper. The approach taken to the gatekeepers in this study, therefore, required thought and planning.

It is important to keep in mind that gatekeepers occupy their positions because they have a significant amount invested in what they are guarding. The researcher, by comparison, is often an outsider to the organization or field, who does not share the same level of investment or obligation. For this reason, participating in the researcher's investigation may involve risks for the gatekeeper. If the gatekeeper feels threatened by the research, or if the disadvantages outweigh the advantages of participating, cooperation can be limited, or access denied completely (Wanat 201). The retail stores studied are personal businesses which are sources of income for the owners, and thus important to their livelihood. The stores could also be important to the owner's cultural connections and their reputations. As a result, their involvement in the study could potentially have financial and social ramifications.

Although I am not tied to the particular stores being studied, there is still a concern for the retailers' sense of security, and therefore I feel an ethical obligation to them. For this reason I incorporated consent forms (Appendix A) to minimize the potential risks of participation. I also tried to lessen the possible anxiety of participation in the research by reassuring the store owners that this study was reviewed and approved by an ethics committee.

The consent form was primarily used as an official document for recording the

participant's agreement to being involved in the study. However, for the participants it was also a useful point of reference. The form provided an overview of the research, stated the research objective, defined how the participant was to be involved, and specified the possible risks. The form also provided resources which participants could refer to if they experienced any problems. An additional clause clearly stated that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time, without any repercussions.

The consent form was provided to maintain ethical standards. However, this research was low-risk for the participants, as it involved analyzing information that was publicly accessible. The information I sought included the store's presentation, its location, what goods or services it offered, the objective of the store, and how the retailers interact with consumers. The most immediate concern for participants appeared to be whether or not the study was a worthwhile investment of their time, and whether or not their involvement was in line with their store's mandate. A failed attempt to gain participation from the two owners of **Play De Record** helped me to recognize the importance of these factors when approaching potential participants.

The failure to gain access with **Play De Record** could have been the result of the owners' a lack of interest in the study. It might have been more effective to provide a briefer introduction to my research, with a greater focus on the importance of their participation and my interest in their culture, which I did not stress.

My inability to gain access at **Play De Record** could also have resulted from lack of a referral. Utilizing mutual friends to introduce me to either Nav or Jason Palma, the owners of **Play De Record**, could have facilitated this initial interaction. This strategy could have encouraged their participation by suggesting my position as an "insider." It

was this particular status that gave me access to **The Bombshelter**. Gaining Zion's participation was notable because he rarely gives interviews. Zion and I had an established relationship before I approached him to participate in my research. I suspect it was this rapport that granted me access to the store and his consent for an interview.

Cosmos Records was a store I had known about for a couple of years. I knew a few people who were regular patrons of the store, but did not know the owner. With **Cosmos,** I did not have the same connections to the owner as I had at **The Bombshelter**. My relationship with the owners of **Come As You Are (CAYA)** was even more distant. I discovered the store in *NOW* magazine, from an advertisement for their sexual education workshops. Similarly, I had no connections with **CAYA** that could ease my introduction. Therefore approaching the owners of **Cosmos** and **CAYA** and negotiating access to their stores needed greater consideration and effort than my negotiations with Zion. It became clear from these experiences that consent and participation are heavily influenced by how the gatekeeper receives the research and the researcher.

Semi-structured Interviews

As illustrated above, approaching gatekeepers requires consideration in order to gain their participation. However, it requires as much consideration to determine how to actually go about interacting with them in order to acquire pertinent information. As Fontana and Frey observed, an interview is an active process that involves an exchange between two or more people in creating a story. Highlighted earlier was how the retailers, who are the interview participants and the gatekeepers in this study, affected the information that was accessed. However, the researcher also has a significant influence

over the results of this process.

In their essay "Gatekeepers and Keymasters: Dynamic Relationships of Access in Geographical Fieldwork", Lisa Campbell *et al.* describe the relationship between the gatekeeper and the "keymaster." By "keymaster," they are referring to the researcher, the individual instigating the research and creating the final product. These authors acknowledge the gatekeepers and their ability to affect the information gained and the end result. However they also place great emphasis on keymasters and the power they possess in the research process. These authors explain that the way the relationship between a gatekeeper and keymaster develops depends on how they interact and respond to each other. Since the researcher can influence the conduct of the gatekeeper and the interview participant, the way researchers decide to conduct themselves is an important element in the data gathering process.

I was aware of all this during my research, and was wary of directing or leading the information I acquired. Therefore when initially conducting my interviews, I tried to minimize the potential of directing the information by making an effort to keep my interview questions open-ended. By doing so I provided the retailers with the space and opportunity to speak freely about their stores and activities. Appendix B lists the general questions posed in these interviews.

All the interviews were semi-structured, and allowed to progress with little guidance. The interviews were controlled only in terms of the broad topics discussed. These topics included what goods and services the store provided, who the store's patrons were, the owner's background in their store's area of specialty, and how their store is run. These questions were not posed in any set order, but introduced into the conversations

when relevant. The questions were general reference points from which to initiate discussions. This allowed potentially important themes and ideas that were not considered while forming the questions, to enter the discussion.

The owners were treated as authorities on my research topic, and this was crucial because the store owners *are* the authorities on their stores, their activities, and their patrons. By positioning myself as a novice, I was able to interject at points to speak about my research intentions and my perspectives to discuss them rather than leading the store owners' responses. The authority-novice relationship prompted the owners to correct me where they saw I was wrong, and to explain ideas more thoroughly. Additionally, my candour supported a development of trust between the owners and myself.

Presenting myself as a student-researcher helped to affirm the novice-expert relation. The store owner's comfort and trust were my primary concerns. Ensuring that I gained their trust and treating them as authorities helped encourage the owners to speak openly and without reservation. By emphasizing my status as a student-researcher and specifying that the information gleaned would be published in the form of a thesis paper, I was able to reinforce the legitimacy of my study and its ethical standards.

To support an easy and comfortable experience for the interview participants, I made myself available at their convenience. This let the owners determine the times and places that suited their schedules. The store owners, Zion, Abe, Forbes-Roberts, and Lamon, each agreed to one interview, and all the interviews took place in either the retail space itself or at a nearby café. The interviews happened during the months of August and September, which are relatively busy months for these stores. In order to capture all the necessary information, I presumed no time restrictions, but allowed the conversations

to continue for as long as they related to the topics, without becoming repetitive. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes.

All the interviews were recorded, except the one with Abe, on a hand-held tape-recorder. Using a tape-recorder proved to be a bit problematic when recording in cafés. Although the cafés were relatively empty, the hand-held, with its built-in microphone, magnified minute sounds while muffling the voice of the speaker. But despite these difficulties, the recorder was generally very effective at capturing the dialogue and picking up on the various elocutionary styles of the interviewees. Fortunately, the interview participants did not see my sound recording equipment as intrusive, and it did not deter my participants from openly discussing their stores. I also took careful notes while recording the interviews. The recorder failed to function during the interview with Abe, necessitating a heavy dependency on notes. However notes were also important for the interviews that incorporated a recorder. Notes were particularly useful during sections of recorded conversations where the participant spoke too quickly or could not be heard clearly.

The interviews were effective for identifying relevant ideas and concepts, articulating the purpose of the stores' activities, and explaining the meanings these activities communicate. However, by including data from textual and observational analyses, I was better able to see these ideas, concepts, and theories in practice and also identify any discrepancies. To capture this information I visited each store an additional three times, during both the work week and on the weekend, and was permitted to take photos of the store and gather pamphlets and flyers for further analysis.

Textual analyses were helpful in gathering data about the organization of the

stores, their products, and how they present themselves to consumers. This method was essential for identifying the means of signification retailers employ, and to help assess the meanings being communicated.

I also conducted observation sessions in the stores. I made observations on how the store associates interacted with consumers, the types of consumers the store appeals to and how the consumers navigate the space, products, and other patrons of the store. By combining the data from observations and textual analyses with the data from the interviews, a better sense emerged concerning the social meanings these retailers were creating or communicating, and the resulting impact on their client communities.

Organization of Data

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed each interview and then organized the data around the central topics of this thesis. Next I incorporated data gathered from observations and textual analyses. Organizing the data in this manner was efficient, and provided easy access to specific information while making assessments of each case. As stated earlier, analyzing multiple stores individually and then comparing them helped to reveal any social patterns that were common between the stores, as well as any unique occurrences or events that were specific to each case. The following chapter will present these findings.

Chapter Three: Data Analysis

This discussion of the research data will be organized into three sections: 1) the specialization of the stores (and the meaning or value they create through specialization); 2) the subculture as a target market; and 3) the retailer as a cultural intermediary. The progression of these discussions will show how specialty retail store owners operate as social agents. This presentation will serve to highlight the social and cultural aspects of their work.

The Choice to Specialize

The selection of which goods to provide is one of the most fundamental and critical decisions retail store owners can make. Their decisions determine who their stores appeal to, how they operate, the messages they communicate, the impressions they make, and ultimately the success of the businesses. The store owners in the three case studies (Zion, Abe, Forbes-Roberts, and Lamon) each explain how profit is not the primary focus for their work. Instead, they place the greatest emphasis on the social and cultural objectives of their unique specialty stores. Through the specialized goods they provide and the space they commit to their work, these owners gear their efforts towards achieving their store's largely cultural objectives. **The Bombshelter** and **Cosmos Records** specialize by providing a very particular range of goods, while **Come As You Are** specializes by providing a variety of goods for a particular use. I'll begin by describing the goods offered at **The Bombshelter**.

The Bombshelter, located at Queen Street and Spadina Avenue, has been in business for nine years. Zion is the current and original owner of the store. Since he first

opened his doors to the public in 2003, he has offered paint markers in a range of colours, caps for spray paint, a variety of books and DVDs about graffiti culture, as well as other instructional resources. Spray paint, however, is and always has been **The Bombshelter**'s primary product. Three of the four walls display only spray paint. The cans of paint lie on their sides in open cupboards that extend from floor to ceiling. With their rows of coloured caps facing outward, these shelving units present a mosaic of colours and finishes. The emphasis on this product is clearly communicated, thus presenting **The Bombshelter** as a specialty store.

The specialization of **Cosmos Records** is also immediately discernable, as there is only one type of product—vinyl records. **Cosmos** began as a single store in 1997, but grew into two separate stores in 2004: **Cosmos Records** at Queen and Portland St., and **Cosmos Records West** at Queen and Bathurst St. Aki Abe has been the owner of **Cosmos Records** since opening the first store. Both his stores specialize in providing specifically vintage vinyl records. In both stores you can find rows of records that run up and down the center of the space and along its perimeter. Due to this singular focus, the specialization of Abe's stores is obvious.

Come As you Are (CAYA) differs from **The Bombshelter** and **Cosmos** as it does not focus on providing one particular type of product. In fact, this store provides a great diversity of goods and services. But **CAYA** can still be considered a specialty store because everything they provide satisfies a very particular purpose. **CAYA** provides sex-trade goods. The store has been open for approximately 14 years, and since then has carried a wide variety of sex products and resources for sexual education. The goods they make available include condoms, sex toys, garter belts, sex furniture, books, DVDs,

magazines, and greeting cards that are all sex themed. Erotic art produced by local artists is displayed on the walls around the store, and is available for purchase. Event flyers and workshop schedules are located at the front of the store, along with pamphlets which provide information on a variety of topics centered around sexuality. There are also product information cards such as a sizing chart for harnesses and material descriptions dispersed among their related products throughout the store.

The decision to dedicate a retail store to a particular specialization is a conscious decision, and all the owners in my case studies made this choice. The job of retail store owner carries a significant degree of responsibility, risk, and pressure. Retail store owners are responsible for the success or failure of their businesses. It is up to the owners to choose the location, select which goods and services to provide, determine the presentation, hire the employees, determine the hours of business, manage the bills, maintain the inventory, and come up with the finances to fund the entire operation. Therefore retailers need to select goods which they perceive as offering a viable business. Their work and what they provide must be recognized as relevant and needed to a consumer market.

In the interviews I conducted, each of the retailers in these case studies confidently expressed the value and importance of their work. They also projected this message through their style of presenting goods, and the general appearance of their store. It was apparent that signification is an important tool for these store owners.

A number of theorists, such as Mike Featherstone, Paul du Guy, and Angela McRobbie, argue that consumer goods can be recognized as symbols, which people use to socialize and communicate ideas with one another. These goods are tools people can

employ to express themselves, to engage with their environment, and understand their world. We can see how these uses of goods are acknowledged and encouraged by all four retailers in my case studies.

The retailers I interviewed all described what their choice to specialize meant to them. Zion stated:

> What **The Bombshelter** represents is a central spot where you can get the products that are a part of graffiti culture. My belief is that by housing the products that are within our graffiti culture, it helps define that we are a solid culture. We're not a bunch of vandals running around (interview).

Zion clearly describes how he took charge of supporting and representing the community of graffiti writers and artists. At **The Bombshelter** he provides tools used in graffiti such as sketchbooks, instructional resources, and equipment like a workbench and desk in order to support the development of graffiti writing and illustration. Zion believes that graffiti is a creative craft that requires the cultivation of skills. This belief is especially pronounced in his description of the training and support received by a top graffiti writer in the city. Zion describes this artist's incremental education and development in the practice of graffiti writing, including the support and nurturing given by the writer's parents. Zion's effort to provide a space to work in, as well as relevant tools and services, reflects his desire to provide others the opportunity to practice and develop their skills.

The physical structure of the store also works to Zion's advantage. The complex where **The Bombshelter** is located is at semi-street level, and requires a short descent to

access the store's entrance. As a result, there is a low wall in front of the store, which Zion uses to test colours and demonstrate techniques.

The name of the store alone is indicative of its specialization. By naming the store "**The Bombshelter**," Zion incorporates a term with direct reference to graffiti and the store's connection to it. "Bombing" is the physical act of spraying paint on a wall or surface. By also including the word "shelter," the store name invokes notions of protection, cover, or accommodation. Putting these concepts together, the overall image is a store that supports and provides for individuals involved in graffiti. In addition, Zion frequently uses the expression "The Bombshelter Family" to describe the group formed by his store associates and patrons, which reinforces the store's overall image.

The product that **The Bombshelter** clearly focuses on is spray paint, which can be found in abundance at this store. Zion describes how the particular brands of spray paint he carries serve the objective of the store and reflect the consciousness of the writers and artists:

> The products I carry are Montana Gold, Montana Black, Montana Spain, Sabotaz spray paint, Felton spray paint. These spray paints are created with the artist in mind. Each one of these brands has well over 100 different colours. Montana Germany, Montana Gold have 166 colours. So at $7 a can, and the average writer uses 12 cans for a nice piece, it doesn't make sense for a vandal to come into my store and buy anything. If you're going to come into the shop, you're going to spend money because you're going to create something beautiful, that you're proud of. And I think we have to tip our hats to these artists because they

> are going to create something beautiful out of their own pockets (Zion interview).

This quote reveals Zion's concern for the status of graffiti culture and its participants, as well as his investment in providing for them. His goods and store are recognized as providing the tools and the space necessary for the artists' development and to support their culture.

The specialization at **Cosmos Records** is vintage vinyl records, but owner Aki Abe further narrows this selection by focusing on only a few genres. Vinyl record stores were present in the consumer market long before Abe decided to become involved. This particular product was a common consumer item at one time, before it became outdated. But even as the popularity of vinyl records diminished, some record stores remained in existence. Like other vinyl retailers, Abe is committed to maintaining a supply of these outdated commodities in the consumer market. However, Abe states that when he opened his store in 1997, he intentionally introduced a concept that was new to record stores in Toronto: genre specialization. Abe's concept for his record store is an appeal to mature record collectors, whom he recognizes as favouring a few select genres. Other record stores at this time basically carried music that was on vinyl records. Abe's store focused on the genres of jazz, funk, soul, and later expanded to include latin and brazilian.

Abe has two retail stores dedicated to providing vintage, vinyl records. In describing the two stores and the differences between them, he says,

> One provides vintage music that is catered towards the DJ culture. Which means Soul/Jazz, related to [the] sampling and producing of modern hip hop, house,

> classic, and early rap that laid the foundation [for] current dance music, rare underground disco that DJs are looking for to spin or sample, dancehall reggae, and rare funk, which are related more towards the dance floor; all of course on vinyl. The second store provides vintage music that is catered towards the collectors. They are totally different than the DJs, which means, more full length LPs (not singles) that include the genres jazz, soul, brazilian, latin, and psychedelic rock. I guess more emphasis on listening to a full length than just one tracker LPs (Abe interview).

Abe's DJ-focused inventory resides in the original **Cosmos Records**. However, it isn't his intention to focus on DJ culture. When enough income was generated from his first store, he opened a second one dedicated to the mature vinyl collector.

Cosmos Records West, which opened in 2005, is where Abe spends most of his time. This store houses all the products he considers appealing to serious collectors. As one peruses the aisles of his second store, it is apparent that most of the stock is dedicated to an extensive offering of jazz, soul, funk, latin and brazilian records. The vinyl records showcased along the store walls include rare and well-known albums from artists such as The John Coltrane Quartet and McCoy Tyner, both noted jazz artists. Additionally, the events promoted by the store are dedicated to these genres. The day I conducted my interview with Abe there was a poster for a Milk party tribute to Stevie Wonder, and a Twilight Zone tribute party presented by The Assoon Brothers & United Soul.

The specialization for **Come As You Are (CAYA)** is particularly interesting as it is a specialization based on diversity. **CAYA**'s specialization lies in the choice to

provide goods and services pertaining to a certain attitude toward sexuality. Underlying this focus is the store's commitment to reinforcing diversity. **CAYA** is a cooperatively owned retail store, so the store is run by more than one owner. Of the four owners who currently manage **CAYA**, I was able to interview two, Gil Lamon and Sara Forbes-Roberts.[1] When asked to describe the store, Forbes-Roberts said,

> The store is a cooperatively owned retail sex trade store, so our objective is to create a sex-positive space for our customers to explore sexualities in whatever way they would like to define that. And be a resource for people but not give them a lot of answers so much but give people a lot of choice—[so that they can] figure out for themselves. We feel like sexuality is for everybody and nobody is an expert (Forbes-Roberts interview).

Both Forbes-Roberts and Lamon recognize that everyone has different sexual preferences, and that people have become increasingly comfortable and well educated about sex and sex products. Therefore the goal is to encourage individuals to embrace their sexuality and provide them with options.

The commitment to encourage diversity has been part of this store's history since it opened in 1997, and has been the cornerstone for its development. Forbes-Roberts explained how the store's organizational structure has been pivotal for its objective and its functioning:

> We felt like it was really important to be a cooperative because it means there are these different values, meanings, and experiences coming into the mix. … We

[1] One owner was out of town and unavailable, while another declined to participate in my research.

> wanted diversity, something that's really valued. It wasn't about one person making all the decisions (Forbes-Roberts interview).

For the owners of **CAYA**, supporting sexuality as a sex-trade retail store is not a matter of simply carrying sex products, it is also about creating an environment that nurtures sexual diversity and openness. This is discernable in the variety of goods and services they offer, and also in the way they present themselves, their store, and their products.

The store normally displays only one sample of each sex toy it carries, and this is presented without its packaging. By showcasing just the product, the store eliminates messages that seem to target certain potential users while neglecting others. Forbes-Roberts explains that many products in the sex-trade industry are packaged in an attempt to identify and appeal to a particular demographic. The packaging most often portrays stereotypical models that are white, skinny, "pornstar-ish," and geared towards appealing to a predominantly heterosexual male audience. In pointing out this issue, Forbes-Roberts clearly reveals the narrow norms she recognizes as being constructed and reinforced in Western society and by big corporations.

By excluding the packaging in their displays, **CAYA** avoids identifying any specific gender, race, sexuality, or even intended use for any product, thereby maintaining an open-ended profile for the user. The same intent can be recognized in **CAYA**'s decision to carry their products in a variety of colours. A sex toy in a peach colour, for example, is never displayed on its own or singled out. It is only made available alongside a range of colours. Therefore the store aims to create a safe, open space, and to support a diverse range of sexual tastes. These strategies and decisions help establish and communicate the store's objectives.

Through specializing, the owners of all three retail stores have been able to identify the relevance of their work and the value of the goods they focus on. The value they recognize is derived mainly from the products' symbolic meanings rather than their functional uses. The functionality of spray paint, vintage vinyl records, and sex products are all necessary, but the main value of these goods lies in their cultural importance and social relevance. This identification of value is created by the retailer through selective emphasis. The retailers reinforce their products' cultural value in the way they speak about their work, and in the visual presentation of their goods and stores. The retailer's work in providing these dedicated spaces and goods involves the creation of meaning. As further analysis of their work will show, a particular taste is being realized through their efforts.

Bourdieu's work in *Distinction* helps to reveal that in the field of production, taste is not created but rather, realized. Taste is identified and articulated through the process of selecting specific items from a wide range of possibilities, and making them available to consumers. Bourdieu posits that taste is guided by one's disposition, and is therefore a reflection of one's social affiliation and status. As Featherstone emphasizes, today's consumer market is increasingly driven by lifestyle consumption. Purchasing decisions are largely dependent on symbolic value, and the goods consumed are selected based on what they mean or what they express about the consumer. Therefore with this in mind, the goods made available by the retailers in this study appeal to consumers because of their perceived meanings, and what they can reflect about the individual's taste, identity, and social status.

The Subculture as a Target Market

MacDonald and Thornton have both brought awareness to the self-created nature of "subcultures." These authors identify how cultural distinctions are constructed in order to identify the parameters of a subculture and help define the identity of the members, as well as to promote what they consider valuable. MacDonald emphasizes that it is particularly a binary relationship with the "mainstream," or as Thornton adds, an imagined "other," that identifies a subculture. In each of the case studies in this research it is evident that the retailers have constructed the notion of a subculture via the same means. This is a significant aspect of their work, and they communicate it as being central to their objectives. This is a very clear indicator of their efforts to become socially engaged.

The cultural underpinnings of Zion's retailing work were easily identifiable from the early stages of our interview. When describing his fascination with graffiti culture he plainly stated, "These urban guys were going against the system in their own way and I thought that was refreshing. Graffiti is its own subculture. It's completely off the radar and everything we do, we do for each other. We don't really do it for anyone else" (Zion interview). Zion clearly labels graffiti culture as a subculture, and describes its activities as challenging an establishment. The graffiti subculture is the cultural group he supports through his work as a retail store owner.

In his description of the spray paint he carries, Zion reveals his perception that graffiti culture and its participants occupy a marginal position in society. The cultural objective of his store is to provide the tools and space needed to support and solidify the graffiti culture. Zion clarifies that "you really can't legitimate graffiti. What it is, is that

our culture shouldn't be bastardized or villainized" (Zion interview). This retailer uses his store to challenge the common perception of his subculture. By suggesting a marginal position for graffiti culture participants and by identifying an established "other," Zion encourages a sense of commonality amongst those who share an interest in graffiti. Additionally, describing a marginal position to his group motivates them as social agents to reaffirm and advance their own status. However, Zion never exactly specifies who it is that bastardizes graffiti culture, or who considers graffiti writers and artists to be "vandals." Therefore in MacDonald's terms, the opponents to graffiti culture Zion refers to are an "imagined other." This strategy of bringing attention to the culture's binary distinction from another entity is effective in grouping individuals together, defining their group as a subculture, and supporting their particular tastes.

Zion explains that when he initially opened his store, it was for his peers in his community. However, the demographic of his patrons has slowly changed over the years:

> Originally when I opened up, I opened for my community, like, my age group community which was mid to late 20s and around that age, in this art form, you're pretty much a veteran. However at this stage you're also in a position where you have to consider longevity and the pursuit of something more stable that can take you through the rest of your life. So they really weren't the ones to come support me on the day to day. They would come to support if they had a gig, where they would need to buy $800 worth of spray cans, but what I realized was that by initially having these veteran writers stopping by every now and

> then, it made the store a hot spot for younger generations of writers that looked up to these old school dudes (Zion interview).

Zion's description of his patrons is revealing. It reflects the changing faces and continual evolution of his subcultural group. Additionally Zion suggests that the individuals who are interested and involved in graffiti are familiar with each other, and form a cultural group. The individuals who enter his store, however, are not all familiar faces: "If someone walks in the doors, "What's going on Gary? What's going on Brian?" If I don't know your name it's no problem. You still feel at home. You have a world of people that stop by because we're downtown Toronto" (Zion interview). Therefore, this statement contradicts the images suggested earlier and clarifies that Zion's consumers may not all be part of one social group. However Zion, through his store, makes an effort to invite all those with a similar taste to feel accepted, supported, and part of a larger whole.

The appeal of **Cosmos Records**' business is also subculture-based. Most retail transactions in the consumer market involve new commodities. Yet **Cosmos Records** differentiates itself by specializing in vintage products. Firstly, vinyl records are outdated commodities that differ greatly from mp3s and CDs, the more common formats for music today. Secondly, the products were made long ago; Abe specifies that the music he offers is from the 1950s to the 80s, rather than being new releases. Therefore his goods are secondhand instead of new pressings. Abe's decision to distinguish his store by basing it on such unusual products sets it apart from the majority of retailers. The provision of such goods supports a consumer group with particular tastes. While

recognizing how these commodities are coming back in style, Abe attempts to create distinction and to establish a subcultural group within the music consuming population.

Cosmos is already specialized in providing vintage vinyl records, but this specialization is narrowed even further by its selection of genres. For Abe, there is a particular type of music collector that he especially supports, and that is the mature vinyl record collector. Abe recognizes these consumers as an elite group of individuals who are "true" collectors, who possess the knowledge, passion, and dedication for "pure" music (Abe interview). Abe describes his concept of "pure" music as "the purity, artistry and the independence of vinyl [that] can be found in jazz music, its production and its distribution during the 50s and 60s" (interview). He explains that during this time period, music was at its prime. There was vast effort and consideration put into both the music and its presentation, such as the vinyl sleeves, information, and art work.

Abe says that in the 1970s, music became corporate-controlled and vinyl products went mainstream, which caused the quality to degrade while the prices increased. Thus, the value recognized in the purity of jazz music from the 1950s and 60s is derived from its originality, artistry, and uniqueness. Abe argues that this value is based on the fact that this type of product was made prior to the mainstream manufacturing that occurred in the 1970s. Therefore he articulates a clear distinction for "pure" music. Abe uses the concept of "mainstream" in contrast to the subcultural group of "true collectors" to support a particular group of individuals, and define the value of his goods. This is reminiscent of the argument made by MacDonald that subcultures are defined by their efforts to separate themselves from other cultural groups. Abe's description of his primary consumer, the mature collector, is a clear example of this. We

can therefore see his effort to communicate value and support for a particular group of individuals.

Abe recognizes that vinyl records are purchased by a range of consumers. However, when describing these consumer groups he makes a clear distinction between the general consumer group and the mature, true collectors. His description of particularly DJs and younger generations of collectors are examples of this. I will first discuss his perception of DJs, and then his views on younger generations.

Being an occasional DJ himself, and recognizing that a portion of his consumer base is comprised of DJs, Abe includes these consumers in his general idea of vinyl collectors. However, as stated earlier, it was not his intention to focus primarily on DJs. As he clarifies this, "anyone can be a 'furniture iPod,' but to be a good DJ, you need new music" (interview). He further explains that his use of the term "new music" is not in reference to new releases, but rather to rare, unheard music. This description refers to his perception of "pure" music he described earlier: music that was produced prior to mainstream manufacturing—music which was independent, original, and artistic. Therefore it is the individuals who possess rare music, and are knowledgeable and passionate about pure music, who occupy a higher cultural position in Abe's eyes. Again, these are the mature collectors.

Abe also discusses his concern for authenticity, and says this value is upheld by mature collectors. He uses the term "mature collector" interchangeably with "true collector." These "mature" collectors, he says, want originals, while reissues tend to be appreciated by newer and younger generations of collectors. Abe recognizes that the "collectors that are interested in purchasing reissues are great for commerce but they're

not true, pure collectors" (Abe interview). It is clear from this description that he makes a distinction between older and younger collectors. Mature collectors, also identified as "true" or "pure" collectors, recognize authenticity and appreciate originality, while younger collectors do not hold the same perception of value. Erecting these distinctions makes it clear that Abe primarily supports a small, elite group of true record collectors. He expresses his appreciation for the support of all his consumers, as they support his business from a financial standpoint. However it is evident that he does not hold the same degree of value for all his consumers. The distinctions he reinforces establish a subcultural group within his consumer demographic. This kind of construction helps retailers promote the value of their work and the goods they provide. It also identifies cultural values and goals that motivate retailers as agents to advance their group's social position.

In the case of **Come As You Are**, the subcultural constructs are built around the idea of "sex-positivity." For the owners of **CAYA**, being a cooperative goes hand in hand with embracing diversity and expressing something they recognize as sex-positivity. Co-owner Gill Lamon recommended the book *Real Live Nude Girl: Chronicles of Sex-Positive Culture*, by Carol Queen, as a resource for my research on their store. This is an important text, not only because an owner singled it out, but also because it provides a definition of the term "sex-positive." In the following quote, Queen describes this concept, its social implications, and the cultural meanings created through its reinforcement:

> In one quick "click!" moment, the term "sex-positive" made all my years of living at odds with mainstream sexual culture make sense. I wasn't just marching

> (and fucking) to the beat of a different drummer—I was instinctively shaping a life of sexual dissent because the culture into which I was born saw appropriate sexuality as such a narrow, normative path. Most sexual possibilities were off the beaten path, many ignored or excoriated, illegal or branded immoral by a majority culture that had no true respect for even the bright light of heterosexual passion. Not that passion was the heterosexual norm: repressing female sexuality saw to that (Queen ix).

Queen's statement identifies sex-positivity as being in opposition to the normative, narrow concepts of sexuality that prevail in Western society. This notion of sex-positivity has been adopted by **CAYA**'s managers and reinforced through their retailing work. In discussing their values, the managers make explicit reference to the mainstream as a point of opposition. As in the other case studies, we can see how **CAYA** has used the subcultural construct of a binary relationship with the mainstream in order to increase the significance of the individuals and the ideas they support.

Forbes-Roberts employs a description of the conventional sex shop as a point of reference to distinguish the values of **CAYA** and its consumer group. She describes the conventional sex shop as "a little bit dark, people not asking a lot of questions, not having a lot of conversations, and lots of packaging, toys on the wall—there's lots of products." She states that big companies like Don Johnson and Howard Erotica put all their money into packaging and she emphasizes how this is negative. The imagery they present is typically "the white, skinny, pornstar-ish [figure] catering to a solely heterosexual male audience" (Forbes-Roberts interview). She concedes that **CAYA** does have consumers with preferences that fall within this stereotype, but argues that

presenting and supporting this one view is not what **CAYA** is about. **CAYA**'s preference for diversity is also reflected symbolically through the presentation of their products: "We don't put a lot of product out, we just have samples of everything, to try to get away from that overwhelmed-by-products feeling and to also get away from packaging" (Forbes-Roberts interview). As discussed earlier, their removal of packaging encourages greater accessibility.

CAYA also puts significant consideration into creating a fun, approachable, festive, and welcoming atmosphere for the store. The storefront is painted bright green and has two large bay windows flanking each side of the entrance. The bay windows are converted into displays to showcase the store's products and communicate the store's ambiance to passers-by. For the month of September, the owners created a "back to school"-themed product display. On elevated platforms, recognizable symbols that represented "education," such as textbooks and letters, were colour coordinated with sex products. By doing this, the darkness and seriousness of sex is done away with to allow for a light, approachable, and accessible idea of sex. The interior of the store similarly expressed a sense of fun and festivity. There were cartoon drawings and funny, light-hearted notes dispersed throughout the store, which reinforced this sense of fun. The bright green colour theme ran throughout the store. And a colourful array of products in different shapes and textures were displayed around the perimeter, as well as on display tables in the centre of the space. At the time of my visit, the main display table was set up to convey the idea of a picnic. A red and white checkered tablecloth covered the table. On top of it was an array of items like flowers, books, a basket, wine bottles, cups, with sex toys and games. By such a whimsical approach, the store again supported

concepts of diversity, fun, and open-mindedness. The storeowners sought to underline their distinction from the mainstream's narrow, stereotypical views about sexuality.

One distinct and interesting feature of **CAYA** is that its owners do not attempt to support one particular group of individuals, as in the case of **The Bombshelter** and **Cosmos Records**. Instead, they make an effort to appeal and support a wide range of individuals with the goods, services, and space they provide. Both Lamon and Forbes-Roberts describe the store's wide range of consumers, which vary in age, gender, ethnicity, background, and sexual orientation, among other things. However, we can still clearly see how the store uses subcultural distinctions. In this case, such distinctions are employed primarily to create value for the retailer's goods and their work, to support a wide variety of sexual preferences, and promote sex-positivity.

All three retailers in this study demonstrate use of subcultural constructs, and make these constructs central for their store objectives. In the case of **The Bombshelter**, Zion utilizes these constructs to support and reinforce the value of a marginalized social group that he directly refers to as a subculture. Abe also utilizes these constructs to elevate the status of a particular group of individuals. He establishes a distinction amongst customers who purchase vinyl records, in order to create value for a very specific taste. The owners of **CAYA**, however, primarily use subcultural constructs conceptually to define the value of their goods and objectives, rather than to structurally reinforce an exclusive social group. Although each of these retailers have differing objectives and outcomes from their activities, their uses of subcultural distinctions are equally valuable for their work.

In this analysis, I have illustrated the agency that retail store owners possess, and described the kinds of opportunities they have to highlight particular tastes of their choosing. I have identified how the retailers' selection of goods is the cornerstone for their work and the success of their stores. As retail store owners have the ability to direct their work toward supporting particular tastes, individuals, or social objectives, their role involves a position of privilege and potential power.

In his book *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu described a category of work that possesses similar characteristics—the role of cultural intermediary. He uses this concept to identify the roles and activities of individuals belonging to a specific social class. Discussing this concept in relation to specialty retail stores owners provides a similar social perspective on retailing work. In the following section I will compare the work of the retail store owners with that of cultural intermediaries, and identify the similarities.

Retail Store Owners as Cultural Intermediaries

Although Bourdieu does not identify the specific jobs a cultural intermediary might occupy, he makes inferences by describing the characteristics of the activities. The key characteristics he identifies include work that is based on social capital, the provision of symbolic goods, and an effort to challenge established culture. In all three of my case studies, the work of specialty retailers resembles the work of cultural intermediaries as described by Bourdieu based on these characteristics.

Bourdieu argues that the work of cultural intermediaries is well suited for the new petite bourgeoisie, as it allows these people to promote the kinds of capital they possess, and support the tastes and status of the social group they associate with. The

retail store owners in this research fit Bourdieu's description. Their specializations are not been chosen at random. Like cultural intermediaries, these store owners create roles guided by their tastes and the cultural capital they possess.

In my interviews with the store owners, they each described having a personal interest in their store's specialization prior to becoming a retail store owner. Zion is a graffiti writer who began writing about 20 years ago. He acquired the name Zion as a graffiti artist, which is a pseudonym he still maintains. He explained that his appreciation for graffiti and his own participation as a graffiti practitioner motivated him to open a retail store specializing in graffiti products.

Before moving to Toronto, Abe was already involved with vintage, vinyl records while living in Japan. He describes how he submerged himself in the vinyl culture at an early age. His interest continued to develop when he became a DJ, and when he started working in record shops. After he moved to Toronto he maintained his engagement with vinyl records by opening **Cosmos Records**.

During the individual interviews with Lamon and Forbes-Roberts, they both mentioned having an interest in sexual education prior to joining **CAYA**. Forbes-Roberts was active at her university as a radio personality. She hosted a range of discussions relating to sexuality with her callers on air. She also worked in community centers and kiosks that similarly provided sex-ed resources and information. Her past, like Abe and Zion's, reflects a personal interest and investment in the store's specialization. Lamon however, differs from the other owners. In terms of work experience, her background is in the field of information technology. However, she explains that she frequented events, festivals, and lectures related to sexual education,

and had considered a career change into this field much prior to making the transition (Lamon interview). Lamon became active as an owner at **CAYA** five years ago, while Forbes-Roberts became involved with the store in its second year, nine years ago.

The background of each of these owners reveals a personal investment in their store's area of specialization. They each have experience and advanced knowledge in their respective fields. Therefore their decision to base their work around goods with which they have experience and have a personal investment can be identified as work that is based on the cultural capital they possess.

Cultural intermediaries utilize their own kinds of capital to appeal to similar, like-minded individuals, and support the groups whose tastes they share. In order to gain recognition in their communities of choice, they depend on signification. The importance of signification is also apparent in the work of specialty retail storeowners. The goods these retailers provide have a value greater than their functional use. The specialized goods featured at **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records**, and **Come As You Are** are chosen as having symbolic value for the specific ideas they communicate and the tastes they support.

These tastes that the specialty retailers support are commonly recognized as being in opposition to the "mainstream." And this sense of opposition reflects another similarity between the retailers in these case studies and cultural intermediaries. Bourdieu argues that through their symbolic defiance, cultural intermediaries support a specific taste, and draw recognition to it. However, although they challenge the current social order, they do not overthrow it. Cultural intermediaries challenge the established

culture by promoting the value of tastes they favour, rather than those of an established culture.

Expressing one's taste through consumer goods inevitably supports the recognition and value of that taste, and it affirms other people of similar tastes. Therefore the retailer's work of providing these symbolic goods and their efforts to establish a binary relationship with the established culture can also be seen as challenging values of the current social order.

Through their work, their ability to identify a specialization, and their role in communicating values, specialty retailers are able to lend support for particular tastes. They are also able to develop subculture communities which provide individuals with social and cultural support. Through these activities, retailers are able to define the parameters of the tastes and subcultures they cater to. In the final chapter of this thesis, the social impact these retailers have through their work will be discussed. The last chapter will also explore the environments in which these stores function. Comparisons between the cases will be made and considering how the key theories of this research apply, conclusions concerning these retail store owners' social significance will be drawn.

Conclusion

In his analysis of how individuals socialize in the consumer market, Mike Featherstone claims that customers today have greater self-awareness that affects their purchasing decisions. People have grown more interested in expressing themselves, their social affiliations, and lifestyle choices through the goods they choose to invest in. Consumer purchases are now commonly based on the symbolic value of the goods, rather than their functional value. Symbols such as consumer goods therefore allow social agents to express themselves and communicate ideas. The work of retail store owners can therefore be seen as providing the tools with which social agents can interact with their peers.

As diversity creates an environment that recognizes variation, one can also state that the importance of symbolic value is heightened by social diversity. Greater variety enhances differences and similarities, which in turn further nurtures self-awareness. Diversity is an important and prominent characteristic of Toronto, especially in the concentrated downtown area. The city's social landscape provides an excellent climate for the exchange of symbolic goods. Its cultural complexity reinforces the value of goods as symbols and as communicative tools. Within this diversified social context, specialty retail stores that provide symbolic tools, such as **The Bombshelter**, **Come As You Are,** and **Cosmos Records**, fill a valuable role in the market. These three stores have demonstrated great success as they have all been operating as specialty retail stores for around 10 years. One can therefore argue that the success of these specialty retail stores is supported by the social landscape. The longevity of the retailers in this study also suggests that these store owners are well aware of the special demands of their

environment. They have effectively capitalized on the situation through deciding to specialize in meeting the unique tastes of particular cultural groups.

An infinite quantity and diversity of products is available from manufacturers across the globe. Specialty retail store owners are able to exercise their social agency through selecting which goods they will offer. From the selections they make, they determine which tastes and individuals their work supports. To clarify, Bourdieu specifies in *Distinction* that taste is not created (230). Rather, taste already exists, but it is the work of specialty retailers that helps consumers realize their tastes through making specialized selections of goods available. This choice in making certain goods accessible is a primary indication of how the retailers in this study have a social influence.

Sharon Zukin's essay "Shopping" reveals the social power inherent in the occupation of a retail store owner. In her essay she describes how the act of shopping, selecting which products to purchase and utilize for communication, is an opportunity for consumers to make cultural statements. Each individual has this kind of agency, and consumers find that shopping is a way for them to exercise this power. Retail store owners also possess agency. However, rather than exercising their agency through their own purchases as end users, the retailers exercise their agency through the goods they make available for others. By their ability to provide symbolic goods of their choosing, they can make cultural expressions. Additionally, as the retailers determine which tools to make available for consumers to purchase and communicate with, they also impact the expressions their consumers make.

The concept of the cultural intermediary as described by Bourdieu ties the central ideas raised in this study to the activities of retailers, and helps reveal the social impact of

the retailer's work. In his analysis of the new petit bourgeoisie, Bourdieu identifies the advantages gained by individuals who play a cultural intermediary role. He emphasizes the opportunities this role provides in allowing people to support their own taste and advance their social status. By focusing their work on expressing their taste, cultural intermediaries are able to promote their taste and reinforce the recognition of its value Doing so, they challenge the prevalence of other, more established tastes and the social status of those that possess them. As a result of this adjustment in the hierarchy, the cultural intermediary is able to support their social advancement.

In the previous chapter, specialty retailers were identified as cultural intermediaries based on the similarities between their activities and those described by Bourdieu. These similarities include work activities based on the provision of symbolic goods, the use of capital for the foundation of one's work, and the effort to challenge the tastes of an established culture. As the retailers in this study base their work on their own tastes and the capital they possess, they are able to benefit socially from their work like the cultural intermediaries Bourdieu describes. Additionally, the success they achieve promoting their tastes by providing symbolic goods carries an added benefit of financial gain. The more recognition and appeal they acquire for their goods and what their goods express, the greater the number of consumers that will invest in their store and business. However the influence of their work extends beyond the personal level, giving them a social impact.

Bourdieu identifies the activities of cultural intermediaries as extending and re-establishing culture through involvement in the cultural industry and provision of symbolic goods (*Distinction* 360). Through these work activities cultural intermediaries

function as mediators. Retailers, who stand in between the production of goods and their consumption by end users, can also be seen as occupying a mediating role. But rather than supporting a specific class like the cultural intermediaries in Bourdieu's research, the cultural intermediaries in this thesis support particular cultures or subcultures within a multicultural market. These retailers challenge the cultural tastes of established groups in society, and provide reinforcement for individuals who share their own subcultural tastes.

MacDonald and Thornton's theories about the self-created nature of subcultures help identify how **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records,** and **CAYA** can be associated with the development of social groups. These subcultural groups form themselves primarily by constructing a binary relationship, contrasting their own views and preferences with those of the "mainstream." The way these retailers define the social groups and values they support is therefore informed by what they regard the "mainstream" as upholding.

The specific brands of spray paint which Zion makes available, the particular genres of vinyl records Abe offers, and the way Forbes-Roberts and Lamon decide to present their sex-related goods are all based on a desire to communicate ideas and values that challenge or oppose those of the mainstream. Additionally, their recognition of mainstream preferences also influences how accessible they allow the social group they support to be. Although their retail stores are open to the public generally, these store owners make it apparent that they support specific groups of individuals.

Among the stores examined in this study, **Cosmos Records** is the most exclusive, as its manager takes a specialization in vintage vinyl records even further, by focusing on specific genres of music. Abe identifies that consumption of vinyl records has grown

more "mainstream." He responds to this with further specialization, identifying a sub-group of customers with more particular tastes. Abe focuses primarily on the genre of vintage jazz from previous decades, and identifies this as "pure" music. As a result, he cultivates an exclusive subcultural group within the vinyl record community.

Zion supports graffiti artists, illustrators, and their subculture as a whole. He identifies how graffiti culture has been marginalized by "others." Therefore, Zion helps establish a separation between those that appreciate and participate in graffiti versus the "others" who do not.

CAYA differs from **Cosmos** and **The Bombshelter** in that their goods appeal to a wide range of individuals. The subcultural construct erected identifies mainstream sexual taste as narrow. The opposition **CAYA** constructs is between mainstream taste and their own broad acceptance of diverse sexual tastes. The distinction this store establishes is thus between those who follow narrow perceptions of sexuality, and those who recognize and embrace sexual diversity.

As Thornton explains, social distinctions entail claims of authority or superiority from others (10). It is plain to see that the retailers in this study employ such subcultural distinctions to emphasize the value of their goods, their work, their tastes, and the groups they support. Furthermore, their establishment of a binary relationship with the "mainstream" creates a social framework that reinforces the significance of supporting their subcultural tastes. Conceptualizing an opponent who is in a dominant position, yet claiming the superiority of one's own subcultural taste imbues purpose into one's activities. This then fortifies the value of the goods offered and the importance of investing in or supporting the subculture's taste. These three case studies illustrate such

social considerations and objectives as they appear in the retailer's activities. The goods these stores offer are therefore not just material objects, but embodiments of a specific taste, sources of empowerment, and a gateway to social belonging. These retailers' work is then not about supplying commodities, but rather providing social support and cultural reinforcement.

In this study, it is crucial to see that the consumers these retailers appeal to do not necessarily form unified groups. Due to the fact that retail stores are openly accessible to the public, they commonly have customers they are unfamiliar with, and who do not join with other consumers to form a subculture. In the case of CAYA, the owners do not even attempt to support an exclusive group. **Cosmos** and, to a degree, **The Bombshelter** do attempt to create some social exclusivity, yet they still have consumers they have never met, and who hardly participate in the specific taste their stores reinforce. This is revealing, as it suggests there is a range of individuals and slight deviations of tastes or purposes that these specialty retailers can appeal to. Therefore, in these case studies we can more accurately understand the social relevance of subcultural distinctions as based on their conceptual value rather than their structural impact.

Bourdieu points out that individuals possess varying dispositions, and there can be nuances of difference even amongst similar tastes (170). Realizing a "subcultural" taste and providing specialty goods for people of similar tastes offers these consumers a sense of identity, recognition, and social belonging. They may nurture a social group through their retailing activities as they bring together similar people and give them an opportunity to socialize or align with peers. However, these activities can offer social benefits even for individuals who decide not to become members of a larger group. This

is especially apparent in the case of **CAYA,** whose consumers may share tastes in sexuality, but exercise those tastes in private. Still, these customers are able to find goods in the consumer market that appeal to their own tastes, and which enable them to embrace their unique sexuality while feeling accepted socially. Therefore, in this scenario it is the symbolic value of the goods that achieve the customers' aims, rather than the creation of social relations among fellow customers.

The social application of symbolic goods in all three case studies is based on their use as subcultural capital. Thornton identifies that subcultural capital is the currency needed for an individual to gain social acceptance, recognition, and social mobility. For both consumers who are active in the subcultural group, and for those who are not, investment in subcultural capital allows those individuals to feel like they belong, yet still recognize their distinction and to express it.

As the work of retailers involves the realization of particular 'subcultural' tastes and the provision of relevant subcultural capital, one can conclude that the owners of **The Bombshelter**, **Cosmos Records**, and **Come As You Are** function as cultural intermediaries. As a result of their work, the specialty retailers play an important role in how individuals understand and negotiate their identity as well as their social position among their peers. Staying true to their role as cultural intermediaries, the taste they support and the symbolic goods they provide leaves an impression not only on the individual but also on the relationships between people and the overall social structure.

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Appendix A

CONSENT TO PARICIPATE IN
'Articulations of Distinction: Cultural Intermediaries and Subcultural Capital'

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Crystal Lee of the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University. Contact info: 647-880-0592 or crystal.c.lee@gmail.com

1. Purpose

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to study how retail stores participate in culture and what their impact is.

2. Procedures

Research for this study will be conducted at multiple retail stores, with the store owners and employees. Additionally, research will be conducted at variety of cultural events with event participants. Extensive interviews (approx. 20-30 min.) will be conducted with store owners, employees and cultural event participants. These interviews can take place at any location (i.e. at the store, in a coffee shop or a park) or though any other means (face-to-face conversation, speaking over the phone or through email) that has been agreed upon by the interviewer and interviewee.

By consenting to participate, I am agreeing to speak to Crystal Lee about my understanding of the culture in question and its participants, my familiarity with a specific retail store, its relationship to the culture and my involvement in that culture. In discussing my involvement, I will not require to divulge detailed information about my activities. However, information such as the length of time I've been involvement in the culture in question and how I would label my position in it (such as being a general supporter out of personal interest or being an established artist, performer or teacher) may be discussed. I understand that I can refrain from answering any questions that make me feel vulnerable and that any information that I do divulge about my involvement will be withheld if I request for confidentiality.

I understand that face-to-face and phone interviews will be taped by a voice recorder unless I specifically request not to be taped. Similarly, if I request it, my name will be refrained from use along with any additional information that may reveal my identity in order to protect my confidentiality and/or well being.

3. Risks and Benefits

Potential risks from the publication of my name, activities, identity and opinions could include experiencing backlash from readers who do not agree with my support or involvement with the culture in question. Publication could lead to the recognition of my involvement in the culture in question and, as a result, possible backlash from people that know me. Furthermore, backlash may also come from other cultural participants who may not appreciate my activities in the culture or my opinions. I may also receive backlash from my peers in this culture due to my involvement in this study. Another potential risk from publication is the revelation of my identity and activities to authority figures.

Potential benefits from the publication of my name, activities, identity and opinions could include wider exposure. This could lead to greater recognition, support and appreciation for my cultural involvement, activities and work. Opportunities for career advancement and additional occasions for personal exposure could also arise.

4. Conditions of Participation

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.

I understand that my participation in this study is CONFIDENTIAL (i.e. the researcher will know, but will not disclose my name, activities and identity) / NON-CONFIDENTIAL (i.e. my name, activities and identity will be revealed in study results).
Note: the participant will make the selection between the two choices prior to the interview.

I understand that my interview with Crystal will BE TAPED / NOT BE TAPED.
Note: the participant will make the selection between the two choices prior to the interview.

I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at areid@alcor.concordia.ca.

Appendix B

InterviewQuestions:

How do you describe your store?

What is its objective?

What kind of products do you provide?

What kinds of services?

What is the history of the store?

How did you become involved in this work?

Why did you become involved?

What the store specializes in?

How long has this store been in business?

Is the idea of ‘taste’ important to your store?

What taste do you appeal to?

Is distinction important to your store?

What kinds of distinctions are made?

Who do you cater to? Who is your target market?

Who are your patrons?

How do you describe this group?

Have they changed over time?