

“I’m with the Band”: Constructing and Deconstructing Culture and Subculture

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The academic study of history of the souvenir t-shirts offers a unique and productive avenue to investigate the relationship between market and non-market exchanges of goods. The production, distribution, and consumption of screen printed, cotton t-shirts occurs across a global commodity chain wide and expansive in the first stages of production but one then parsed and divided into ever-narrower production sectors as the product is transformed from agricultural good to article of clothing emblazoned with iconographic images. The production process for t-shirts works within and supports the global market and accompanying transportation system and yet, the secondary production and marketing sector responsible for turning out souvenir t-shirts functions as a type of craft production rather than commodity production. A t-shirt begins life as a commodity, interchangeable, able to be substituted one for another; it, more often than not, ends life as an inalienable possession that is kept, stored and treasured rather than traded.

T-shirts begin their lives as commodities but that definition begins to fray as the production process moves across the global production chain. Shirts are transformed from wisps of cotton to cotton thread, cotton fabric, and shirt blanks. Those blanks then move along to scaled-down, often privately owned shops, where they are screen printed in small batches marketed on the beach, in booths outside concert venues, or even to be given away as a badge of honor for completing a race or volunteering at a community event. This project focuses on the history of the marketing and purchase of band t-shirts as a consumer practice that both constructs and contests existing cultural and social structures. Band t-shirts graphically display identity as an allegiance to a sub-culture and yet, even in the iconography of that fringe group, in this case a particular music group, there is a tension between rebellion and resistance and participation in the larger, commoditized culture.

The study of souvenir t-shirts offers an opportunity to investigate a broad swathe of contradictions necessitating a mixed methods approach. In order to uncover those contradictions, this project employs a material history methodology to explore how individual consumers construct their identity and belonging through the non-discursive purchase of concert t-shirts juxtaposed against an empirical analysis of the cotton commodity chain as it functioned across the twentieth-century world.