

Defining ‘Normie’, ‘Casual’, ‘Ironist’ and ‘Autist’ In Internet Subcultures

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The following is my take on doing the same for online subcultures. I do this by clarifying the definitions of three highly popular terms used on the Internet to describe different kinds of subcultural participants, and clarifying the concept of the ironist in the context of online subcultures.

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Attempts at typologizing subcultural demographics are not new (for a clear and interesting example, see [‘Geeks, MOPs, and sociopaths in subculture evolution’ on Meaningness](#)).^[1] But online subcultures are different from ordinary subcultures. The following is my take on doing the same for online subcultures. I do this by clarifying the definitions of three highly popular terms used on the Internet to describe different kinds of subcultural participants, and clarifying the concept of the ironist in the context of online subcultures.

The Internet has a particular aesthetic disposition towards everything from the kinds of art it makes and consumes to the kind of art it consumes and makes into memes (in the loose sense). The disposition is

obscure, obsessive and obstinate: the denigration of normies/casuals is a very important aspect of many online subcultures, and the in-group/out-group boundary is frequently secured by elitism regarding how difficult the activity is to discover and appreciate. An example is powerlifting, probably one of the least fun sports of all time. It's also the national sport of /fit/ because of how useful strength training is for other sports as well as because of the STEMLord-like fixation to obscure details often required of the participants in the way it is practiced. A more well-known example would be anime, but it's a confusing example because of how popular it has become in mass culture. But the effect of providing an identity for the communities doesn't disappear with the mainstream uptake of these esoteric interests. For instance, Olympic weightlifting has become increasingly more mainstream with the success of Crossfit, which offers a lower bar of initial entry for casual participants (no pun intended). Purist lifters have no trouble maintaining their identity as such.

FOUR TYPES OF USERS IN AN ONLINE SUBCULTURE

	low expertise		high expertise
low commitment	normie	→	ironist
high commitment	casual	→	autist

The arrows indicate the direction of conversion from one type to another. Information acquisition is treated as irreversible here for simplicity.

See the diagram, which shows a new way of thinking about the kinds of members in an online community, which can easily be applied to offline communities to a lesser extent. I've taken three popular terms from online subcultures and introduced to the mix a fourth term, the 'ironist'. Normies and casuals are individuals characterized by a mixed lack of expertise of a subculture. Although enthusiasm changes a normie into a casual, commitment to the subculture alone is insufficient to make them into ironists or autists, who have more practical knowledge. For example, many entry-level fans of video games are very serious about their 'gamer' identity and love to show it through spending hundreds of dollars on merchandise and exclusive features or even tattoos.

Normies are characterized by a strong commitment to the vocabulary* of the mainstream, conventional and the 'IRL-centric' view of the Internet as a mere extension of meatspace. Casuals are enthusiasts who lack the expertise and deeper understanding of the alien vocabulary of another subculture (for instance, consider weeaboos and the Girugamesh/Sakura-Con advert). They are outsiders and aspiring ex-outsiders. Ironists are veteran users with low commitment to the subculture itself, whether the

commitment be emotional or otherwise. They readily move onto other communities if the friction becomes too high. They tend to be the most flexible and culturally literate of the four types. Autists are hyper-focused users whose intense interest in a specific topic rather than the Internet in general (as is the case with ironists) drives them to create and analyze online. Knowledge stains, so ironists and autists can't 'take the blue pill' and go back to being normies or casuals. There is fluctuation in the seriousness with which the individuals treat the field of interest, and so casuals often go back to being normies or autists back to ironists insofar as the particular subculture is concerned. Note that the status of being one type or another is always in the context of a particular subculture, and not an essence of the individual. Hence the label of normie can both be generally applied to digital/memetic literacy at the same time as to much more specific areas. For instance, I would be an origami normie because I'm neither enthusiastic nor knowledgeable about origami. The reason the model is not so appropriate for many real life subcultures is that being an 'ironist' is an oxymoron in most subcultures, which tend to be voluntary communities. Why would people show up if they weren't committed? A class clown who still meets the grades or a cynic who enjoys being the contrarian might be the unusual examples of such a case, and the importance of ironists as a core constituent of online communities doesn't translate into IRL. Generally, only the other three types are commonly seen in most subcultures.

Ironists play a very important role in cyberculture, and are arguably more important than the autists who do most of the serious creative work in the communities. They range very broadly from trolls to shitposters, and readily participate in low-demand discussions and offer input at whim rather than with the obsessive seriousness of the autists. They are characterized by expertise in another dimension: normies. The combination of fluency and a lack of commitment means that they can remain skeptics about a subculture without eschewing it altogether. The lack of commitment means a broader range of interests and potential for inter-subcultural understanding. Because they are not invested in an identity based around a single subculture or its rules of engagement, they can poke holes into the inconsistencies of a subculture or deliberately subvert its practices for fun. The practice frequently leads to improvements and innovations for the subculture.

A healthy online subculture is formed of a combination of all four types of users. Each type of users engages with the community differently and their input is therefore also different. For example, the casual simply enjoys any content related to the subculture, regardless of quality or relevance. A community full of casuals would be an ideal place for merchandise vendors, but not for ironists or autists who want something more substantial. It would have its own advantages such as a very high level

of activity and energy, potentially attracting new members who can engage more deeply with the subcultural output than the casuals. This is often what is meant by “entry tier” when it describes popular and accessible content that leads to engagement with more challenging but rewarding aspects of the subculture. A community of only autists has a difficult time attracting new membership and tends to be less enjoyable because of the seriousness and isolation so characteristic of these hyperfocused participants. A community of only ironists has a hard time staying on topic or getting to the core of issues being discussed, but is often adept at spreading and sharing practical information as passed on ‘orally’ rather than systematically as often preferred by the autists. A community of normies may seem like an oxymoron, but the countless examples of subcultural communities which became institutionalized (e.g. a lucrative but unremarkable brand) before being abandoned by even the casuals provide a good example of this type.

The four types of members interact with each other differently. For instance, the casual may be disproportionately snobbish when dealing with normies and be easily trolled by ironists. The autists may in turn have a hard time dealing with overconfident casuals, and an impossible time communicating with normies. How they behave and oscillate between the interrelated types (i.e. casual-normie link and ironist-autist link) differs depending on various factors such as the frequency of other types within the subculture. A very common phenomenon is a subculture becoming normified through an influx of casuals which leads to a disillusionment of autists, turning them into ironists who may enjoy the product or topic personally but cease to be invested in it altogether. An inverse pattern is sometimes seen when the lack of seriousness recontextualizes effort: in a community of ironists and casuals, a lone autist ‘effortposting’ can cause a huge splash as the atypical seriousness of the input proves simultaneously hilarious and useful for all members.

Consider now that there is a development of the types from the left side of the graph to the right as participation leads to information. Although there are various traits that would affect the direction, normies are by default potential casuals, ironists and autists. Various subtypes can be identified on grounds of this fluidity. For instance, normies who fail to display the potential for further development are sometimes referred to as ‘turbonormies’. Those who readily oscillate between the ironist-autist link are called ‘post-ironists’, whose defining trait is the lack of commitment to any single subculture and its world-view. Many subcultural technologies are employed by members in order to facilitate the beneficial conversion of normies into casuals, ironists or autists (much more often, normies into casuals

then either ironists or autists). Elitism is a good example, through which an organic sorting of high quality and low quality participation occurs within the subculture.

Because its members are neither natives nor immigrants, and its communities are a hodgepodge mix of numerous subcultural influences (as all of its members occupy many communities at once), it may seem that an Internet subculture is categorically different from IRL subcultures. However, the same characteristic of communities, which causes the fluidity of subcultural membership types online, is that which shapes regional dialects in nations and makes monolingual societies so rare. That characteristic is the tendency of cultures to evolve by mixture and competition. The mixture and competition is not merely that of individuals, in which those individuals with one set of cultural dispositions compete against another group, but rather among the ideas, beliefs and practices themselves. This is not necessarily a memetic process but an evolutionary one in general. It is most important to consider users online in the same light. The general trend in online subcultures is to consider normies and casuals as essentially normies and essentially casuals, despite the very much pedagogical relationships that form between the different types in any healthy community. I hope that this model illustrates my belief that, although the elitism can be healthy for the community in its preservation of culture, there is no reason to believe that elitism per se is necessary for a healthy community. Furthermore, any label of normie, casual, ironist or autist must be totally dependent on the subculture in question in time and space. As practical knowledge becomes outdated, the development from one type to another can be reversed for any individual. Nor is eliminating normies and casuals going to result in the most healthy community, regardless of how reliable the activity rate of ironists and autists is as a marker of community health. This would be to confuse the marker of health with health itself.

*I am indebted to Richard Rorty for some of the terms used here, but the way I borrowed his terms is not an accurate representation of his philosophy.

Selected Comments

Thread 1

“Blaine McCartney: I’ve never really encountered the term ‘ironist.’ Maybe “shitposter” would be better? Or “Baiter,” “Master Baiter”?”

The Philosopher's Meme: *This is part of my ongoing attempt to define 'irony' and 'post-irony'. See also: [Post-Irony Against Meta-Irony](#)*

Pe Ter: *I thought of this concept in Richard Rorty's body of work (which I am neither stumping for, or opposing, but raising as an example of a preexisting definition and use of the term "ironist" in a different context.): <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ironism>*

Nino Lyons: *as much as i found the term "ironist" odd too at first, I'm not sure if naming the category after common practises of the members would fare any better. i feel it conflates the motivations and causes for the ironists irony beyond what is reasonable. Although many of these funky memetic terms do exactly that anyway, and we just grin and bear with it, but that problem just diverts attention away from meaningful discussion and into the pit of lame semantics, so i guess its w/e ¬(')/¬"*

Thread 2:

Adam D. Millson: *Is it really impossible to move from high expertise to low? I think that would happen very naturally to anyone who loses touch with the subculture while the subculture advances."*

Thread 3:

Andrew Crowe: I agree with the proposed structure and it being more productive than elitism. Although I think the high expertise and low commitment column (ironists) could be redefined. I think the term irony does have a bad reputation at the moment and there are other mentalities which would fit the criteria imo. I think absurdism would be a fundamental of the category (high understanding with heavy scepticism and levels of disinterest) although the actions aren't always ironic. Irony is often employed by casuals as well in an attempt to mask a lack of expertise.

Bibliography

1. Chapman, D. Geeks, MOPs, and sociopaths in subculture evolution. Meaningness. Available at: <https://meaningness.com/geeks-mops-sociopaths>

