



***CULTURE, SUBCULTURE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF DRUG
USER IDENTITY IN TRAINSPOTTING: CULTURAL STUDIES
PERSPECTIVE***

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Abstract

This study examines the cultural construction of drug user identity in Trainspotting, situating substance use beyond individual pathology within broader socio-cultural structures. Previous studies often interpret drug use as moral deviance or subcultural resistance, overlooking the paradoxical role of subculture in shaping identity while reinforcing marginalization. Using a qualitative mimetic approach, this study analyzes narrative, dialogue, and symbolic practices in the novel and film through cultural studies, identity theory, and subcultural perspectives. The findings reveal that drug use functions as a culturally embedded identity practice, yet subcultural belonging simultaneously reproduces structural exclusion, illustrating the phenomenon of “subcultural entrapment” in late modern society.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Drug Use, Identity Construction, Marginality, Subculture, Trainspotting

INTRODUCTION

Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) is widely recognized as one of the most influential literary representations of drug culture and working-class life in contemporary Scotland. Through its portrayal of heroin users in Edinburgh, the novel explores not only addiction but also broader issues of identity, social exclusion, and resistance to dominant cultural values. The subsequent film adaptation directed by Danny Boyle (1996) further established *Trainspotting* as a significant cultural text for examining the relationship between marginalization, subculture, and identity formation.

The themes presented in *Trainspotting* remain highly relevant in contemporary society. Drug use continues to be a global social issue closely associated with poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. According to the *World Drug Report 2024* published by the United Nations



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<https://ejournal.umpri.ac.id/index.php/smart/index>
SMART Journal: Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied
Linguistics

Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024), approximately 292 million people worldwide used drugs in 2022, representing a substantial increase over the previous decade. Recent studies further emphasize that substance use cannot be understood solely as an individual choice or medical problem but must be examined within broader social, economic, and cultural contexts that shape experiences of belonging, exclusion, and identity construction (Volkow & Blanco, 2021; Montes & Pearson, 2021).

Within this context, *Trainspotting* portrays characters such as Mark Renton, Sick Boy, Spud, and Begbie not merely as addicts but as individuals struggling to construct meaningful identities within an oppressive social structure. They live in a society that promotes consumerism, career success, and social conformity while simultaneously limiting opportunities for working-class communities. This contradiction is reflected in Renton's iconic statement:

"Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family... But why would I want to do a thing like that?"

Rather than expressing simple nihilism, this declaration can be interpreted as a rejection of dominant ideological values and a critique of the capitalist system that produces alienation and exclusion. From a Cultural Studies perspective, the statement illustrates how identity is negotiated through struggles over power, meaning, and social belonging. Contemporary identity theory provides an important framework for understanding this process. Recent scholarship increasingly rejects essentialist views of identity as fixed or stable, emphasizing instead its fluid, performative, and socially constructed nature (Bucholtz & Hall, 2022; Wacquant, 2021). Consequently, the drug-using subculture represented in *Trainspotting* can be viewed not simply as a deviant social group but as a cultural space in which marginalized individuals negotiate alternative forms of belonging and self-definition.

Despite extensive scholarship on *Trainspotting*, several important research gaps remain. Existing literary studies have primarily focused on the novel's postmodern characteristics, including fragmented narration, Scottish vernacular language, and stylistic experimentation (Adi, 2016; Storey, 1996). While these studies provide valuable insights into Welsh's literary techniques, they often fail to connect narrative representation with contemporary theories of identity and power. Similarly, sociological studies have frequently interpreted drug use as either deviant behavior or a critique of capitalism without adequately examining its role in the cultural construction of identity (Golub et al., 2005; Di Placido,

2019).

Another limitation concerns the treatment of subculture. Classical subcultural theories, particularly those influenced by the Birmingham School, generally portray subcultures as forms of symbolic resistance to dominant culture. However, more recent scholarship suggests that subcultures are inherently ambivalent. While they may provide opportunities for resistance and alternative identity formation, they can simultaneously reproduce social exclusion and reinforce the marginal conditions from which they emerge (Bennett & Hodkinson, 2020; Blackman, 2021). This dual function remains insufficiently explored in previous studies of *Trainspotting*.

Furthermore, there is a lack of interdisciplinary research integrating Cultural Studies, contemporary identity theory, and drug studies within a single analytical framework. As a result, the complex relationship between identity, power, subculture, and drug use remains underexplored. Understanding drug use solely as deviance overlooks its symbolic and social significance within marginalized communities and ignores its role in processes of identity formation (Mendelson et al., 2020; Montes & Pearson, 2021).

To address these gaps, the present study offers three main contributions. First, it develops an integrative analytical framework that combines Cultural Studies, contemporary identity theory, and subcultural studies to examine identity formation in *Trainspotting*. Second, it reconceptualizes drug use as a symbolic cultural practice through which individuals negotiate belonging, resistance, and self-definition rather than merely as a form of pathology or deviance (Montes & Pearson, 2021; Mendelson et al., 2020; Zhao & Zhu, 2024). Third, it examines subculture as an ambivalent social space that simultaneously challenges dominant ideology and reproduces conditions of marginalization (Bennett & Hodkinson, 2020; Blackman, 2021).

By adopting this interdisciplinary perspective, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature represents the complex relationship between identity, power, and social exclusion. More specifically, it advances the concept of *subcultural entrapment*, a condition in which participation in a subculture initially functions as a strategy of resistance and identity formation but gradually becomes a mechanism that reinforces marginalization and limits opportunities for social mobility. Through this approach, *Trainspotting* is understood not merely as a narrative about addiction but as a cultural critique of the structural inequalities experienced by marginalized groups in contemporary society.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to answer the following research

questions:

1. How does culture influence the construction of drug users' identities in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*?
2. How does the subculture depicted in the novel function as a form of resistance to dominant culture while simultaneously reproducing conditions of marginalization?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing a descriptive-analytical method, as it aims to explore the social conditions and forms of social criticism presented by Irvine Welsh in *Trainspotting*. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth examination of the relationship between the literary work and the social realities of Scottish society. The primary sources of data consist of both the *Trainspotting* novel and its film adaptation, while the secondary sources include literary theory books, academic journals, scholarly articles, and previous studies related to identity and contemporary cultural studies.

Data were collected through library research, involving intensive reading, note-taking, and the identification of textual elements that reflect social issues such as poverty, child exploitation, social marginalization, and class inequality. The collected data were subsequently analysed using a Cultural Studies approach, an interdisciplinary framework that investigates how meanings are produced, negotiated, and connected to power relations within society as represented in literary texts.

The analysis was conducted through several stages: identifying relevant textual data, categorizing the various forms of social issues depicted in the narrative, and interpreting their social significance within the historical and cultural context of Scottish society. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to examine how Welsh articulates social criticism through the portrayal of characters, settings, and narrative conflicts. Ultimately, the findings are expected to address the research questions and demonstrate that *Trainspotting* functions as a form of social protest against the marginalization experienced by segments of Scottish society during the period represented in the work.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Marginalization and Identity Crisis

One of the central foundations of identity construction in *Trainspotting* is the persistent social marginalization experienced by its characters. Renton, Spud, Sick Boy, and their peers inhabit a post-industrial working-class environment marked by unemployment, poverty, and restricted social mobility. These conditions function not merely as a social backdrop but as structural forces that shape how individuals perceive their own worth and social position. Welsh presents marginalization as an everyday lived reality that influences both material circumstances and subjective identity.

This internalized sense of inferiority is most clearly expressed in Renton's statement: "*It's shite being Scottish. We're the lowest of the low. The scum of the fucking earth...*" More than a simple expression of frustration, this passage reveals the psychological effects of long-term social and cultural subordination. Renton reproduces the very discourse that devalues him, illustrating what Cultural Studies scholars describe as internalized oppression—the process through which marginalized groups adopt dominant narratives about their own inferiority. The statement also reflects tensions within Scottish identity, where historical and cultural inequalities contribute to feelings of exclusion from dominant British narratives.

Importantly, the novel portrays marginalization as both social and psychological. Renton and his friends do not identify with mainstream society, yet they are equally unable to establish a stable alternative identity. Their sense of self remains fragmented, oscillating between resistance and resignation. This condition reflects contemporary understandings of identity as fluid, unstable, and shaped by structural inequalities rather than individual choice alone (Bucholtz & Hall, 2022). Similarly, Wacquant (2021) argues that advanced marginality produces not only economic deprivation but also symbolic dislocation, leaving individuals disconnected from conventional sources of meaning and belonging.

The absence of meaningful opportunities for education, employment, and social advancement further intensifies this crisis. As a result, heroin becomes more than an escape from hardship; it functions as a substitute source of meaning and identity. In this sense, drug use emerges as a response to social exclusion, filling the existential void created by the failure of dominant institutions to provide recognition, purpose, or belonging.

Rejection of Dominant Culture and Neoliberal Values

The rejection of dominant culture is a recurring theme throughout *Trainspotting*. Renton's famous monologue directly challenges the values associated with capitalist modernity:

“Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family... Choose a fucking big television...”

The repetitive structure of the passage mimics the language of advertising and consumer culture, exposing what Renton perceives as the emptiness of a life organized around consumption and economic productivity. Rather than presenting these values as desirable, Welsh frames them as ideological prescriptions imposed upon individuals regardless of their social circumstances.

From a Cultural Studies perspective, the monologue functions as a form of counter-hegemonic discourse. Renton rejects the dominant narrative that equates personal worth with employment, consumption, and social conformity. However, his resistance is not merely rhetorical. He explicitly declares:

“I chose not to choose life.”

This statement highlights the performative nature of identity formation. Renton constructs his identity not through participation in dominant social institutions but through deliberate refusal. Identity is therefore formed through negation as much as through affirmation.

Yet Welsh also emphasizes the paradox of resistance. Although Renton rejects neoliberal ideals, his alternative lifestyle does not lead to liberation. Instead, it often deepens his alienation and self-destruction. This ambiguity reflects contemporary critiques of neoliberal society, which argue that individuals who are excluded from economic opportunities frequently develop oppositional identities while remaining trapped within the very structures they resist (France & Roberts, 2021; Woodman & Threadgold, 2023). Consequently, drug use can be interpreted not simply as deviant behavior but as a symbolic protest against a system perceived as inaccessible and unequal.

Drug Use as Symbolic and Social Identity

In *Trainspotting*, heroin functions not only as an addictive substance but also as a powerful symbol through which identity and belonging are constructed. Renton describes heroin use in almost transcendental terms:

“Take the best orgasm you’ve ever had. Multiply it by a thousand, and you’re still nowhere near it.”

The hyperbolic imagery suggests that heroin offers an experience capable of temporarily transcending the frustrations and limitations of everyday life. Significantly, the

novel frames this experience not merely as physical pleasure but as an alternative source of meaning in a world characterized by exclusion and hopelessness.

Within a subcultural framework, heroin use operates as a symbolic practice that distinguishes the group from mainstream society. Drug consumption becomes a marker of membership, shared experience, and collective identity. The characters develop social bonds through common rituals, narratives, language, and values associated with drug culture. As a result, heroin functions as a form of social glue that creates solidarity among individuals who otherwise feel disconnected from wider society.

Welsh's portrayal therefore challenges purely medical or moral interpretations of addiction. Drug use is represented as a social practice embedded within broader processes of identity formation and community building. Recent scholarship supports this interpretation, emphasizing that substance use is often closely linked to belonging, recognition, and the search for social identity within marginalized groups (Montes & Pearson, 2021; Zhao & Zhu, 2024). In *Trainspotting*, heroin simultaneously provides escape, community, and a sense of self, revealing the complex relationship between addiction, identity, and social exclusion.

Language as a Marker of Subcultural Identity

Language plays a crucial role in the construction of identity in *Trainspotting*. Welsh's use of Scots vernacular is not merely a stylistic choice intended to create realism; it functions as a cultural and political strategy through which marginalized voices are represented and legitimized. By rejecting Standard English, Welsh challenges the linguistic norms associated with institutional authority, middle-class respectability, and English cultural dominance. Consequently, language becomes a site where struggles over power, class, and identity are enacted.

This is evident in expressions such as:

"Ah wisnae even sure if ah could dae it."

The non-standard spelling reproduces the speech patterns of working-class Scots and foregrounds voices often excluded from mainstream literary discourse. Rather than translating these voices into Standard English, Welsh compels readers to engage directly with the characters' linguistic world. This narrative strategy challenges dominant language hierarchies and affirms the cultural legitimacy of working-class Scottish identity.

From a Cultural Studies perspective, language functions as a form of symbolic resistance. The characters' continued use of Scots vernacular signifies a refusal to conform to dominant cultural expectations and reinforces a distinct collective identity. Contemporary

sociolinguistic research emphasizes that language does not merely reflect identity but actively constructs and performs it through social interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2022). In *Trainspotting*, dialect becomes an important marker of class position, social exclusion, and cultural belonging.

Language also serves as a mechanism for establishing solidarity within the drug-using subculture. The characters share distinctive vocabulary, slang, and communicative styles that differentiate them from mainstream society. These linguistic practices create a symbolic boundary between “us” and “them,” strengthening group cohesion while simultaneously reinforcing their separation from dominant social institutions. In this sense, language functions as a form of subcultural capital that signals membership and shared experience.

Furthermore, Renton’s narration reveals the fragmented nature of identity. His discourse frequently shifts between humour, cynicism, self-awareness, and self-loathing, reflecting an unstable sense of self. This supports contemporary theories that view identity as fluid, performative, and continually negotiated rather than fixed or essential (Bucholtz & Hall, 2022; Wacquant, 2021). Language therefore becomes a medium through which Renton simultaneously resists, critiques, and reproduces the social structures that marginalize him.

The relationship between language and national identity is particularly evident in Renton’s statement:

“It’s shite being Scottish. We’re the lowest of the low.”

Although the statement expresses internalized feelings of inferiority, it is articulated through Scots vernacular rather than Standard English. This creates a paradox: the language simultaneously reflects marginalization and acts as a form of resistance to cultural assimilation. As recent scholarship suggests, linguistic practices are closely connected to broader structures of power and inequality (Piller, 2022).

Ultimately, language in *Trainspotting* is more than a means of communication. It functions as a mechanism through which class identity, national identity, and subcultural belonging are constructed and negotiated. Through dialect, slang, and narrative voice, Welsh demonstrates that identity is shaped not only by social conditions but also by the ways individuals speak, represent themselves, and position themselves in relation to dominant culture.

Power Relations and Identity Construction

The construction of identity in *Trainspotting* cannot be separated from the operation of

power. Power in the novel functions not only through political and economic structures but also through cultural discourses that shape how individuals understand themselves and their place in society. Welsh demonstrates that marginalization is sustained not merely by material deprivation but by symbolic hierarchies that define certain identities as inferior, deviant, or undesirable.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Renton's reflections on Scottish identity. His assertion that Scots are "the lowest of the low" reveals how dominant narratives become internalized by marginalized subjects. Rather than resisting these representations outright, Renton often reproduces them, illustrating how power operates through self-perception. As De Lissovoy (2020) argues, contemporary forms of domination are most effective when external structures are transformed into internal beliefs and self-regulating behaviors. In *Trainspotting*, the characters are not simply excluded by society; they come to view themselves through the lens of that exclusion.

The novel therefore illustrates what contemporary Cultural Studies scholars describe as the productive nature of power. Power does not merely restrict individuals but actively shapes identities, desires, and possibilities for action (Couldry, 2023). Renton's recurring awareness of his destructive lifestyle demonstrates this tension. He recognizes the consequences of addiction and social isolation, yet repeatedly returns to them. His choices are not presented as fully autonomous decisions but as responses conditioned by structural inequalities, limited opportunities, and deeply internalized social expectations. Identity in *Trainspotting* thus emerges as the outcome of an ongoing negotiation between individual agency and the constraints imposed by social power.

Moral Ambiguity and Fragmented Identity

A defining feature of *Trainspotting* is its rejection of clear moral categories. Welsh avoids presenting his characters as either victims or villains; instead, they occupy morally ambiguous positions that challenge conventional judgments. Acts of theft, deception, addiction, and irresponsibility are frequently narrated through humour, irony, and self-awareness, complicating simplistic distinctions between right and wrong.

This ambiguity is reflected in statements such as:

"You can't understand life if you're not living it."

The quotation functions as a form of self-justification through which the characters construct an alternative moral framework. Rather than accepting mainstream definitions of responsibility and success, they reinterpret their experiences as authentic forms of living. In

this sense, morality becomes a contested social construct rather than a fixed set of universal values.

Welsh reinforces this ambiguity through Renton's narrative voice, which constantly shifts between cynicism, humour, guilt, and self-reflection. These shifts reveal a fragmented identity characterized by contradiction and instability. Renton simultaneously condemns and participates in the lifestyle he describes, exposing the tension between self-awareness and self-destruction. His narration therefore reflects what contemporary identity scholars identify as the fragmented nature of late-modern subjectivity, in which individuals continuously negotiate competing identities rather than inhabiting a stable and coherent self (Bucholtz & Hall, 2022; Elliott, 2023).

Moreover, the novel suggests that moral ambiguity is itself a consequence of marginalization. Excluded from dominant institutions and social opportunities, the characters develop alternative systems of meaning that allow them to cope with their circumstances. These systems provide temporary forms of belonging and self-understanding, yet they also reinforce the very conditions from which the characters seek escape. Consequently, *Trainspotting* presents identity as fluid, contradictory, and perpetually negotiated, revealing how power, exclusion, and social uncertainty shape both moral judgment and selfhood in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that drug use in *Trainspotting* is not merely an act of individual deviance but a cultural practice shaped by power relations, social exclusion, and identity formation. Through the integration of Cultural Studies, contemporary identity theory, and subcultural analysis, the findings reveal that the identities of Renton and his peers emerge from conditions of class marginalization, cultural subordination, and neoliberal domination. Drug use functions not only as an escape from hardship but also as a symbolic strategy through which marginalized individuals negotiate belonging, meaning, and resistance.

The study further shows that the subculture depicted in *Trainspotting* is fundamentally ambivalent. While it offers solidarity, identity, and resistance to dominant values, it simultaneously reproduces the conditions of exclusion from which it emerges. This paradox extends classical subcultural theory through the concept of subcultural entrapment, whereby

alternative identities provide a sense of belonging yet ultimately reinforce marginalization. Consequently, Renton's decision to "not choose life" should be understood not as simple nihilism but as a response to a social order that promises success while restricting access to it.

Ultimately, *Trainspotting* functions as a powerful critique of late-modern society, revealing how identity is constructed, negotiated, and constrained within complex networks of power. By reconceptualizing drug use as a symbolic practice of identity production rather than merely a pathological behavior, this study highlights the importance of addressing the cultural and structural roots of social exclusion. Future research may further explore how factors such as gender, race, and globalization shape identity formation within subcultural contexts.

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