

social distance. And it does all this without creating significant long-term status costs: Goths are able to achieve these benefits without sacrificing their commitments to education, careers, and their families. For these young people, then, Goth is a subcultural strategy of limited liability.

Notebook

1. What stereotypes do you hold about Goths? Do you know any Goths? In what ways do they fit the stereotypes? In what ways do they dispel them? Could you conduct an interview or some research that would help you understand them better?
2. Wilkins argues that Goths find a certain amount of power in their status as "freaks." Based on what you've read here, do you agree? How do other subcultures you've read about, studied, or known seem to find power in their position as outsiders? What kind of power is it? What sorts of power or access do they have to give up to use this power?
3. If you're brave, you could try dressing up like a Goth, or punk, or skateboarder for a day (with the help of a subculture member to make sure you look authentic!) to see the world through the eyes of that subculture. Go to a fast food restaurant, an upscale store, a bank, or places you usually go dressed as yourself and notice any differences in the ways you're treated. This experiment is a lesser version of the one famously documented in John Howard Griffin's book *Black Like Me*, in which Griffin, a white man, pretended to be black in the 1950s South.
4. On a sheet of paper, create a "T" chart. Label the left side "Myths" and the right side "Truths." Starting with myths, write down all the Myths you've known or learned about the specific subculture you're studying. When you've completed that list, do some research and then fill in the Truths. Get into a group and discuss your findings.

How the Internet Is Changing Straightedge

J. PATRICK WILLIAMS

J. Patrick Williams uses the straightedge subculture—itsself a subcategory of the punk subculture—to look at the ways in which contemporary subcultures are shaped by the way they exist as virtual communities online. If we can't even see the other members of our subculture face-to-face, how, we might ask, are we really members of

the same community at all? J. Patrick Williams is an assistant professor at Arkansas State University. During the mid- to late-1980s, Williams self-identified as punk and straightedge in a local scene in the southeast United States. Since the late 1980s, he has played drums in several metal bands, and has been an active participant in the death metal scene since the early 1990s. He earned his doctorate in Sociology and Cultural Studies from the University of Tennessee in 2003.

What does it mean to be "real?" The phrase "keeping it real," for example, has come to mean something specific in hip-hop subculture, and has spread throughout American pop culture vernacular. How do we know when someone is being genuine, versus faking it? There are many situations in which we find ourselves feeling or believing that people we know are not being honest with us, nor with themselves, about who they "really" are.

People in subcultures—whom we can call "subculturalists"—have always been concerned with maintaining a boundary between the real and the fake. Who is authentic, and who is a poseur? In 1983, D.R.I. (a.k.a., Dirty Rotten Imbeciles) wrote a song about "closet punks"—kids who sometimes dress up to look like punks but are considered inauthentic because they don't embrace the appearance all the time. Later in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, hardcore straightedge bands such Bold and Earth Crisis wrote songs about kids who were not keeping it real. These kids are typically labeled as "sell outs." There's a popular straightedge saying, "If you're not [straightedge] now, you never were!"

But how can subculturalists tell who is and who is not an authentic member? Is it "faking it" when kids do not dress according to subcultural norms? When kids engage in activities that other subcultural members disapprove of? When kids keep the wrong kinds of friends? When their interests change and they drop out of the scene? When they do not like certain kinds of music or certain bands that are considered integral to the subculture? These kinds of questions are integral to my research on contemporary subcultures.

There are many examples of music-based subcultures in contemporary society, each with their own distinctive sounds, styles, values and argot (e.g., punk, hardcore, hip-hop, rave, goth, or straightedge). Each of these subcultures—and many others—are typically understood as music-based phenomena. Yet, however

important music might be, there are changes occurring in contemporary society which require that we question the degree of music's importance for subcultures. In particular, information and communication technologies like the internet are changing the ways in which many subcultural youth participate in what have traditionally been considered music subcultures.

In this essay I explore these changes in terms of one particular subculture called straightedge. A remarkable shift appears to be occurring within straightedge, in which the centrality of music is being challenged. I suggest that the internet now competes with music as a key resource for identity and participation. To do this, I analyze the symbolic interaction among participants in a straightedge internet forum and focus on the meanings that forum members attach to music and the internet, respectively. The shift grows as more internet users learn about straightedge online and begin self-identifying as straightedge without participating in punk or hardcore music scenes. By exposing the debate among participants over what constitutes authentic straightedge identity and what counts as a straightedge "scene," I highlight the role the internet plays in facilitating subcultural growth and change.

THE AMERICAN STRAIGHTEDGE MUSIC SCENE

The straightedge subculture arose around the 1981 song "Straight Edge" by the Washington D.C. punk band Minor Threat. In that song, lyricist Ian MacKaye emphasized how he differed from other youth in his disdain for drug use and promiscuity. Taken as a whole, Minor Threat's lyrics address in various ways central concerns of the band—the apathy of youth and the positive contribution of punk subculture. Hardcore straightedge was partly a reaction to the disaffection and subsequent self-destructive tendencies of many punks, and partly a collective search for meaning in a world characterized by the dissolution of authentic selfhood. The band's ideology of resistance to mainstream culture's emphasis on passive consumerism was not exceptional among punk bands, but the term "straight edge" seemed to strike a chord with punk youth around the US. Within a year or two of the song's release, kids around the country had begun claiming to be straightedge.

Straightedge subcultural norms regarding drug use and promiscuity have been articulated in a variety of ways through music lyrics. More important for our discussion here, however,

is that subcultural norms have been spread in recent years via non-music media such as the internet. In tandem with this subcultural diffusion, individuals have discovered straightedge in a dislocated form, fractured from its musical roots. Of the individuals who encounter straightedge online and subsequently claim to be straightedge, many join face-to-face straightedge scenes, though many others do not. When the straightedgers I studied wrote, they made distinctions between two types of straightedger, which I will name music-straightedger and net-straightedger. Members of these two groups argued with each other about what constitutes being a "real" straightedger.

AUTHENTICITY AND "THE SCENE"

For subculturalists, it is important to be seen as an authentic participant. Subculturalists regularly claim to be "real" while charging others with simply doing subcultural things, such as dressing or speaking a certain way, in order to appear cool or fit in. Those unable to convince others of their authenticity are often labeled as poseurs, pretenders, wannabes, or week-enders.

Authenticity is a complex concept with multiple expressive forms. In this essay, I highlight two dimensions as discussed originally by Kembrew McLeod—the *social-psychological* dimension, which refers to staying true to one's beliefs versus following mass trends; and the *social locational* dimension, which refers to being an insider versus an outsider.

In the *social psychological* dimension, subcultural participants may, for example, tell stories about themselves that highlight their commitment to a subcultural lifestyle. Such narratives often articulate subcultural identity as something innate or self-owned and thus beyond another's control. In such cases, a subcultural identity serves to strengthen an individual's claim of "keeping it real" by legitimating her own behaviors and identity as authentic.

Then there is the *social locational* dimension of authenticity. Consuming specific subcultural products (e.g., music) or actively participating in a local scene, community, or network of friends can be just as important as believing yourself to be a "real" subculturalist. Those who are not part of these groups are labeled as "outsiders." By monitoring where and how individuals participate, subcultural members engage in a game of exclusion whereby only those participants who meet certain criteria are considered "insiders."

Most importantly, participants may not realize that they are using different measures of authenticity in their everyday lives. Rather, the answers subculturalists give to the kinds of questions I asked at the beginning of this essay depend on which dimension of authenticity they rely upon, often unconsciously. Like subculturalists themselves, many researchers assume that subcultural members all measure authenticity the same way. Unfortunately, this means that researchers do not adequately consider how individuals define their own authenticity as subcultural members. Many researchers privilege the voices of some participants over others. We should never assume that subculturalists all share a homogeneous perspective of their subculture because various members often have different views of what is appropriate versus inappropriate, right versus wrong.

Finally, how subcultural members measure authenticity can be linked to the symbolic value they attach to a subcultural scene. A scene is not objectively real; that is, it is impossible to see a scene or determine its boundaries precisely. However, the collective meaning of scene must appear to be objective before it can be experienced. Thus, even though I will argue below that internet forums may constitute a new type of subcultural scene, the idea of an internet scene is not yet salient to most subculturalists. The dominant view that all scenes are face-to-face scenes helps legitimize the assumption that all members give equal value to the social location dimension of authenticity. In order to demonstrate that this is not always the case, I will highlight how definitions of the scene are tied up in how straightedgers identify themselves and others as (in)authentic.

METHODS

My data come from an internet forum and from interviews with participants from that forum. The forum is located on a public website that is dedicated to the straightedge subculture. The website has more than 1,300 registered users from around the world, including Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. I collected the data over a two year period, between autumn 2001 and autumn 2003.

My work was ethnographic, meaning that I participated in forum discussions even as I observed others' participation. I considered myself a regular member of the forum and behaved accordingly. When I had questions that I wanted answered, I took

one of two steps. First, I posted questions on the forum, typically as a new thread. (Threads are chronologically arranged topical conversations that participants can see from the forum's main page.) After posting questions, I monitored responses and regularly asked follow-up questions. Second, I did nine qualitative interviews to gain clarification on the meaning of subcultural activities. The interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes and were done online using instant messaging or chat software. I asked open-ended questions, which allowed the interview to progress naturally. Some of the individuals I interviewed considered themselves straightedge music fans, while others did not. Some had participated in the forum more than a year, while others were relative newcomers. This variety enabled me to develop a better understanding of how different participants felt about issues of authenticity, the straightedge music scene, and the internet.

The messages young people posted in the forum were the sociological object of study, rather than the individuals themselves. Therefore I never tried to discover the "real life" identities of any of the participants. I have given pseudonyms to all the participants mentioned in the paper to protect their online identities as well.

CLAIMING AUTHENTIC STRAIGHTEDGE IDENTITY

Posted by: MeanBug

I've been officially straightedge for about 1.5 years now. I believe this is a lifelong promise. However, some guy said I wasn't straightedge because I don't listen to any straightedge hardcore type bands or go to straightedge shows. I tried to explain I live in Idaho (self-explanatory there) but he said hanging out with other straightedge people was a must. Now, I'm the only one I know. Do I have a problem?*

In this post from the straightedge forum, a participant, MeanBug, expressed concern about her/his authenticity as an "official" straightedger. Questions like this, and the answers given by other participants, represent a debate going on in the forum between

*Forum participants regularly use the acronym sXe as shorthand for "straightedge." It is comprised of the S and E from straightedge surrounding an X, which is a straightedge symbol.

music-straightedgers and net-straightedgers. Individuals supported either the notion that only people who follow straightedge norms and participate in a hardcore music scene could be straightedge or the idea that anyone who follows straightedge norms could be straightedge.

There was one particular thread in the forums that clearly contextualized the debate about the meaning of the scene and how members measured authenticity. The first post came from OldSkoolSk8r, who asked, "Does punk rock, hardcore or whatever it is called nowadays still have a role in the straight edge movement? [. . .] I think the music and the 'punk rock' culture is what makes straight edge unique so the two cannot and should not be separated." Music-straightedgers tended to support OldSkoolSk8r's claim that straightedge was a part of the punk and hardcore music subcultures. Net-straightedgers typically disagreed, while other participants stated that the issue was more complicated than a simple "agree" or "disagree" answer. One straightedge music fan argued that "straight edge can't be independent of the music. It's a subculture centered around a style of music. You take away the music, you take away the subculture, and all you have left is a bunch of drug free kids." Another post represented the opposite view: "I don't believe so at all. Music may have 'spawned' straight edge, but I believe straight edge is fully independent from any musical 'scene'. Besides, I don't listen to punk rock." In both posts, we can see how participants make claims for what counts as "real" straightedge culture.

The main sticking point was whether or not straightedgers must belong to a local music scene in order to be credited as authentic. One hardcore participant, XantagX, authoritatively stated that "without the scene, without the music, there is straight but no edge." In response, a net-straightedger asked, "Where do you get the idea that if you don't listen to a certain style of music you're not edge? Or if you don't 'go to shows' or are 'in the scene' you're not edge? [. . .] Straight edge is a commitment till death of being drug free. [It] is a bond."

Implicit in their dialogue is the larger debate about authenticity, which is alternately conceived either in social locational terms (by being a member of a local music scene), or in social psychological terms (by making a "commitment till death" to follow straightedge rules against drug use and promiscuity). XantagX and OldSkoolSk8r both pointed to hardcore music as a subcultural boundary, first by suggesting that straightedge bands are all hardcore and second by suggesting cultural differences between straightedgers and people who are just "straight." One music-straightedger even asked rhetorically whether his abstinent grandmother should be considered straightedge since she did not engage

in drug use or promiscuous sex. Another music-straightedger supported this allegedly absurd assumption by asking others to imagine a "granny mosh pit." Through such laughable imagery, music-straightedgers sought to show that "real" straightedgers differed qualitatively from members of mainstream culture, even from those who shared similar beliefs about clean living. Grandmothers, and implicitly anyone else who did not participate in the straightedge music scene, were not credited as authentic straightedgers.

Net-straightedgers, on the other hand, made claims to authentic straightedge identity by focusing on lifestyle choices. They often expressed straightedge as a commitment to subcultural norms. One forum member argued that a commitment to clean living (a "commitment till death") was the true source of straightedge identity, not musical preference. Others supported such claims by arguing that interaction on straightedge internet sites significantly diffused the straightedge subculture beyond the boundaries of local straightedge music scenes. In the post below, Nebula describes a variety of methods through which individuals could be introduced to the subculture and implicitly defends the authentic identity of such people as straightedge.

Posted by: Nebula

Let's go like this: XantagX heard "Straight Edge" by Minor Threat. He heard about straightedge from bands & his friends. [. . .] A girl who listens to Korn [a non-straightedge, non-hardcore band] would like to be part of a philosophy that embraces anti-drugs. She hears about it from the internet. [. . .] A boy who listens to Metallica & Megadeath gets made fun of because he doesn't do pot. He finds someone with X's on their hands who tells him about straightedge. He decides to put X's on his hand & to hang out with the other kid as to make a statement about not doing drugs.

Here we see three hypothetical cases in which a person was exposed to and expressed support for a drug free lifestyle. In each case, the source of information about straightedge was different. This post served as a challenge to other participants to prove why or how one person is more or less authentic than anyone else. In other posts, Nebula expressed his conviction that an individual could be straightedge without participating in a face-to-face straightedge music scene. Indeed, he criticized hardcore straightedgers as simply following music trends and not recognizing the "true" meaning of straightedge, namely a drug free lifestyle.

Authentic straightedge identity seemed to be constructed around the idea of commitment, yet the value of commitment was measured using competing assumptions about authenticity. Straightedge music scene members argued for authenticity based on an in-depth knowledge of, and participation in, the straightedge music scene, while net-straightedgers emphasized that those who expressed and maintain a "true till death" ethos were also authentic.

WRITING THE SCENE

Music-straightedgers wrote about the scene as a necessary element in constructing a straightedge identity. According to one hardcore interviewee, the scene was defined by whom one associates with. "Well I hang out with a lot of kids that share my anti-drug beliefs within the hardcore community. [. . .] it's generally the same kids hanging out together almost every weekend and exchanging ideas. It is a scene, because it's at least somewhat based on the fact that we have mutual interests and goals." Other definitions of scene placed explicit emphasis on music. One poster wrote that "going to shows would be the base [of being in the scene] I guess, but not just that. I think it's a lot in helping out to fuel that scene in anyway you can whether it be posting flyers, helping set up gear at a show, working the door, doing favors for bands etc." Those individuals who engaged in these and similar activities gained respect from others in the subculture and the ability to influence others in the scene.

For these forum participants, the scene had to do with their relationship to the production, distribution, and consumption of hardcore/straightedge music. Authenticity involved listening to straightedge music and actively helping to keep the music scene alive. One music-straightedger explicitly stated that the scene was "more than just kids sitting around not doing drugs." Only those who actively participated in local subcultural events such as concerts represented the scene, and thus only they were "keeping it real." During an interview, another hardcore forum participant described the embeddedness of straightedge within the larger punk/hardcore subcultures and claimed that it was senseless to think of straightedge any other way. To him, "a lot of those kids [who claim to be straightedge but do not participate in local music scenes] I think are becoming 'straight but not edge.'" They were "straight" because they did not use drugs, yet they lacked the rebellious "edge" that he claimed characterizes members in the music

scene. He created a distinction between those whom he considered authentic participants of the straightedge subculture and those who were not. He did not challenge the beliefs of non-hardcore forum participants, nor did he grant them any authenticity.

Many participants agreed that straightedge was about a scene, but were not certain whether the scene was only about music. One participant, XdoitdoitX, noted in a post that the internet offered a source of information to individuals outside of punk/hardcore music scenes, some of whom subsequently found the subculture appealing and began to self-identify as members. This happened "because of the education through the internet and other media." Other participants, who at one point supported the music-straightedge position, came to accept at some level the idea that the definition of scene was negotiable. They came to acknowledge that internet participation was worth something, though music preference remained a key definitional component. That is, internet participation and commitment to subcultural norms was not enough. Without investing time, money or energy into a local straightedge music scene, or at least supporting the scene by purchasing straightedge CDs, net-straightedgers lost credibility in the eyes of straightedge music scene members. They remained "straight but not edge."

THE INTERNET AS A STRAIGHTEDGE SCENE

I have suggested that music-straightedgers ground their authenticity claims in a commitment to the face-to-face music scene. This is what I have referred to as the social locational dimension of authenticity. Where one participates from—from in front of a stage watching straightedge bands play, or from one's bedroom sitting in from of the computer—has everything to do with whether one is accepted by others as straightedge. Meanwhile, net-straightedgers grounded their claims in commitment to subcultural norms. For them, it does not matter whether one is a straightedge music fan, nor does it matter whether one lives in large city with an active scene or in a small rural community where nobody has ever heard of straightedge. As long as one self-identifies as straightedge and follows straightedge norms, she is straightedge. This is what I have called the social psychological dimension of authenticity: being true to oneself rather than to a group. Yet, it would be foolish to argue that there is a one-to-one correlation between a straightedge type (e.g., music-straightedge) and a dimension of authenticity (e.g., the social locational dimension).

The data support the notion that both dimensions of authenticity are important to both straightedge types. Music-straightedgers believed that scene participation was important *in addition to* following straightedge norms. Likewise, net-straightedgers believed that there was more to the subculture than simply following rules. In fact, that is why they were participating online in the first place—to find people with similar interests and experiences so that they could collectively express their identification with straightedge subculture. Net-straightedgers typically relied on the internet as their primary, if not sole, source of straightedge information and activity. Most knew no other straightedgers in the face-to-face world. For many of them, the internet was a social space that enabled them to create and express a subcultural identity that could not find support in the face-to-face world. Others chose not to participate in face-to-face straightedge scenes because they did not enjoy the music. Still others reject participating in a local straightedge music scenes because of the people who populated them. As one participant wrote: “I hate scene drama. I hate that there is a hierarchy within the scene, almost like a caste system. I hate everything having to do with them. The world is falling apart and somewhere there is a kid worried because the scene looks bad.” From this perspective, we come to see a line between the scene and its proto-typical constituent, the “scenster.” The scene was a neutral medium for subcultural participation, while the scenster represented the shallowness of many music-scene members.

Criticism of scenster is used by net-straightedgers as a wedge to open up the subculture to re-evaluation, with emphasis on their belief that straightedge was changing, and that this change was necessary for the subculture’s survival. Among some of the net-straightedgers I interviewed, there was a belief that straightedge was a positive youth subculture which was limited by its association with music scenes. Net-straightedgers made observations about subcultural configurations that worked to exclude people who did not belong to face-to-face music scenes and explained why and how straightedge was changing to incorporate a larger pool of participants. For them, the internet served as a more inclusive subcultural space.

One participant described the straightedge scene in this way: “It’s just about creating a posi[tive] space that’s drug free and supporting it. That’s all, I guess it’s about making a difference. Small as it may be, it’s something, you know?” Importantly, this definition came from a music-straightedger who stated explicitly elsewhere in the forum that non-hardcore participants were not

“really” straightedge. Yet this definition describes exactly what all straightedgers on the internet forum were doing—creating a positive social space to support individual’s decision to live a straightedge lifestyle.

THE INTERNET AND SUBCULTURAL LIFE

The diffusion of subcultures through the internet is indicative of the extent to which information and communication technologies inundate our everyday lives. Sherry Turkle, a well-known internet researcher, argues that as people spend more and more time in virtual places, there is a push to break down the boundaries between “real life” and “life on the screen.” Breaking down such boundaries will give people more and better opportunities for action, communication and political power. Certainly, we can see such desire in the discourse of net-straightedgers as they work to deconstruct the barriers not only between the online and face-to-face worlds, but between mainstream and sub-cultures. The quality and quantity of debates concerning the differences between music-straightedgers and net-straightedgers represents just how much computer-mediated communication affects subcultures.

The growth of the internet and its continuing penetration into our everyday lives confounds the idea that a face-to-face scene is necessary for subcultures because it allows more individuals who are disconnected from face-to-face hardcore music scenes to nevertheless interact within the subculture. The case under investigation suggests that straightedge is undergoing a noticeable shift in who has access to subcultures and how those people affiliate with them. These shifts are noticeable from a perspective that accepts the fluid and contingent characteristics of identity and culture.

Notebook

1. Straightedge is a subculture within a subculture—it’s a branch of punk. (There’s a “roots and origins” topic idea for you!) In the next chapter there’s an essay about another punk subculture, emo. What other mini-subcultures exist within music subculture, or other subcultures? Consider a project about death or speed metal, queercore punk, or another such sub-subculture.
2. Think about the two dimensions of subcultural participation that Kembrew McLeod developed and J. Patrick Williams explores here. How can you apply this theory to the other subcultures in this book? To the subculture you’re studying?
3. In this essay, Williams criticizes “researchers [who] assume that subcultural members all measure authenticity the same way.” What do you think about

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