

THE STRAIGHTEDGE SUBCULTURE ON THE INTERNET: A CASE STUDY OF STYLE-DISPLAY ONLINE

Abstract

This article discusses one way in which cultural studies theories can be applied to current research of subcultures on the internet. Starting from Clarke's and Hebdige's theories of subcultural style and Frith's theory of music and identity, a case study of an online subcultural website is used to highlight the ways in which resistance is displayed by members of the 'straightedge' music subculture. In particular, usernames and signature files are analysed to demonstrate how style is constructed to communicate subcultural values and beliefs. At the same time, a critique of semiotic analyses of subcultural style is raised. It is argued that ethnographic methods are better suited to interpreting social psychological and cultural meanings attributed to subcultural activities in cyberspace.

Subculture, music and the internet

According to Anne Beezer (1992: 111), 'music, so often the focus of subcultural identity, isn't simply a commodity: it is a leisure commodity. As such, it is how music is used, and why it is used that becomes important.' Theorists such as Dick Hebdige (1979) and Simon Frith (1996) have argued that, through music, subcultural identities emerge and are expressed. Their work shares roots in 'new subcultural theory', which developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham during the 1970s (e.g. Hall and Jefferson, 1976). This tradition demonstrated how youth subcultures were typically grounded in leisure activities, perhaps most significantly music, as well as the conspicuous consumption of style. Much contemporary research has also identified subcultures as being a combination of ideology, sartorial uniqueness and musical preferences (Bennett, 1999; Rosenbaum and Prinsky, 1991). Examples include research on Deadheads (Adams and Sardiello, 2000), metalheads (Krenske and McKay, 2000; Locher, 1998), techno/ravers (Luckman, 1998), punks (Fox, 1987), straightedgers (Allan and Kidder, 2000; Irwin, 1999; Wood, 1999) and any number of others (e.g. see Epstein, 1994).

Cultural studies' focus on style and resistance (e.g. Clarke, 1976; Hebdige, 1979) remains in some ways particularly appealing for researchers of music subcultures. However, left behind in much contemporary work has been the CCCS's emphasis on class as the key sociological variable in explaining subcultures. Contemporary subcultures are more often viewed as being akin to taste cultures (Mukerji and Schudson, 1986) than to 'parent' or class cultures because their consumption patterns often transcend class-based distinctions. Recent work has attempted to tease out a postmodern understanding of music subcultures, seeking

to excavate the inner rationales of music, its histories and conjunctures, its relationship with capitalist modes of production, and how music is understood simultaneously as a subcultural resource, a form of subcultural expression and a medium for subcultural existence.

Simon Frith's theoretical work has engaged the dialectic of music and identity by arguing for a processual definition of both:

In examining the aesthetics of popular music then, I want to reverse the usual academic and critical argument: the issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates an experience ... that we can only make sense of by *taking on* both a subjective and a collective identity. (Frith, 1996: 109)

Implicit in this are two ideas. First, music is consequential in the creation of a subculture rather than a consequence of it. It is through active participation in the production and consumption of music that subcultural identities are created and develop. Previous work on the music-subculture nexus has shown how subcultures utilise music to construct collective identities and to ritualise identity-making processes (e.g. Frith, 1981; Hutson, 2000). These processes may take the form of going to clubs and dancing, but may also occur through fandom or interacting around lyrics and musical techniques.

Second, through the musical experience — both making and listening to music — individuals become locatable within conjunctural cultural formations. This raises the issue of how researchers approach music subcultures, for they cannot be understood merely in terms of production and consumption, just as they cannot be understood only in terms of style. Music subcultures are fluid and are constituted by the experiences of both producers and fans (not to mention the fact that producers are also music fans). Subcultures are made up of human beings who gather and interact with others based on shared interests, values and beliefs. Punks do not only exist or gather at gigs, for example, but punk music provides an important subcultural resource that members use to construct selves.

The internet today provides another important subcultural resource and means for constructing subcultural identity. Subculturalists gather in chatrooms, post on bulletin board systems (BBSs), trade music MP3s, and publish infozines and fanzines, all in cyberspace. The internet provides an alternative place to school, home and gig where subcultural youth can establish meaningful relationships with other individuals who hold similar interests or affiliations. For members of music subcultures, the internet serves as a site where topics of subcultural interest can be discussed including the negotiation of subcultural frames of reference, information on music, bands and face-to-face subcultural activities (e.g. concerts), as well as providing a relatively safe environment to openly talk about their lives and experiences. The internet also makes possible the dissemination of subcultural information beyond the limits of the local (Fine and Kleinman, 1979) and, as a result, facilitates the entry of individuals who might not join a face-to-face subcultural group. Thus the internet promotes the growth of interest-based cultural groups, or what Jan Fernback (1997) refers to as 'lifestyle enclaves'.

The concept 'lifestyle enclave' comes from community studies and refers to groups which develop around shared values and interests. In cyberspace, such groups often construct collective identities through textual discourse within and across group boundaries (Billig, 2001; Zickmund, 2000). Similarly, a key feature of much subculture research has been the emphasis placed on processes through which subcultural members resist a so-called dominant culture. Punk (and later hardcore) is an exemplary subculture that resists the 'mainstream' through style (Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1993). With the movement of subcultural groups into cyberspace, we should expect to find new stylistic forms of resistance. This article explores the relationship between cyberspace, subcultural identity and resistance by analysing displays of subcultural style. A case study of an internet site dedicated to the 'straightedge' subculture illustrates the relationship. I first describe the methods employed for analysing the case under investigation and then provide a brief history of the straightedge subculture. Next I turn to an exploratory analysis of how identity and resistance are achieved through displays of straightedge style, then conclude by discussing how an ethnographic approach to studying the internet offers a more in-depth picture of subcultures than a semiotic approach.

Methods

Research on subcultural life in cyberspace requires a reconceptualisation of how qualitative methods are employed. This study combines more engaged methodologies such as participant observation and interviewing with unobtrusive measures such as content analysis, a methodological style that has been referred to as *cyberethnography* (Ward, 1999). As in traditional ethnography, the researcher attempts holistic description and interpretation of a socio-cultural system through immersion into a cultural 'field'. However, in this case the field is made up of messages posted to an electronic bulletin board forum. I therefore spent a majority of my time reading the comments of other participants and in this sense rather passively examined textual artefacts, which Bainbridge (2000: 57) calls 'observation ethnography'. This passive examination of subcultural texts was complemented by a full cycle of communication with subculturalists online, asking questions and receiving answers, which can be called 'informant ethnography' (2000: 57).

This research spanned more than 18 months of cyberethnography in an asynchronous Bulletin Board System (BBS) that caters specifically to members of the straightedge youth subculture. The website's owner/administrator is located in Australia, but participants also come from New Zealand, North America and several European countries. In short, participants post messages that others with an internet connection and a web browser can access and read (see Kollock and Smith, 1999). Participants can click on 'threads', textual conversations that are organised chronologically on the BBS forum main web page, to interact. Those who do not want to add their voice to the thread (referred to as 'lurkers' because they are rarely 'seen') may continue on to other threads on the forum. There were approximately 1300 registered members of the website's forums as of March 2003, though about 400 were lurkers.

Data from subculturalists were collected using three methodological strategies. First, qualitative content analysis (see Altheide, 1996) of threads provided a conceptual framework of subcultural norms, values and beliefs. The second analytic strategy was more interactive and consisted of posting messages in threads asking for participants to share their knowledge and opinions on issues related to resistance and style. The third strategy consisted of in-depth interviews with selected informants, which supplemented other methods by enabling clarification of the meaning of subcultural phenomena from subculturalists' perspectives. Interviewing took place online using either an Instant Message (IM) or Internet Relay Chat (IRC) program. I made no attempt to contact any participants through any means other than electronic. In this way, participants' face-to-face identities remained protected, though their usernames have also been changed in this article to protect their online identities. This triangulation of methods builds a more substantial database and reduces the risk of my interpretations differing from those of participants themselves. Qualitative analysis was facilitated by the QSR NVivo software package, which allowed a large degree of freedom in how data were analysed (Welsh, 2002).

The straightedge youth subculture

Straightedge is a 'subcultural schism' (Wood, 2000) of the punk/hardcore music subculture that emerged in the early 1980s on both the East and West Coasts of the United States and now has worldwide adherents. The term 'straightedge' comes from a 1981 song entitled 'Straight Edge' by the Washington DC band Minor Threat (Minor Threat, 1981a):

I'm a person just like you/ but I've got better things to do/ than sit around
and smoke dope/ cuz I know that I can cope/ I laugh at the thought of eating
'ludes/ I laugh at the thought of sniffing glue/ Always want to be in touch/
Never want to use a crutch/ I've got the straight edge!

This song represents the first use of the term 'straightedge' in the context of an emerging subculture of youth who actively resist what is seen as a promiscuous and self-indulgent youth culture as well as a commercialised mainstream culture that entices youth to engage in destructive behaviours. Minor Threat were instrumental in defining more than just the name of the subculture; a song on their second 7 inch EP provided a rudimentary ideology. In 'Out of Step' (Minor Threat 1981b), vocalist Ian MacKaye claimed:

I don't smoke/ I don't drink/ I don't fuck/ At least I can fucking think/ I
can't keep up, can't keep up, can't keep up/ Out of step with the world.

This statement became the founding 'rules' for the straightedge subculture, which were based on 'a deep hatred for the lifestyle' of the larger youth culture of the late 1970s (MacKaye, in Small and Stuart, 1982).

Since then, the rules have been broadened into a complex subcultural discourse that varies between straightedge groups as well as within groups. Within a decade of its genesis, various straightedge groups and individuals had adopted radically different perspectives on the subculture. Some have incorporated a militant or

'hardline' perspective towards outsiders and see themselves as soldiers engaged in a war. Other perspectives include the adoption of vegetarian/vegan ethics, an anti-corporate or do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic, animal rights activism, and religious cultism including Krishna Consciousness and the Process Church of the Final Judgment (O'Hara, 1999; Tyler, 1997; Wood, 1999). Straightedgers today report feeling alienated and disenchanting by youth culture in much the same way as members did 20 years ago (Wood, 2001). On the one hand, they reject a perceived dominant culture that supports and emphasises the use of drugs and promiscuous activity, and on the other hand are against the nihilistic attitude of fellow punks who prefer to drop out of the system rather than make a stand for what some straightedgers believe is a responsibility to foster social change.

Stylistic displays of straightedge identity and resistance

In terms of face-to-face subcultural groups, straightedge is an expressively music-based phenomenon that has remained largely limited to the punk/hardcore music scene (Allan and Kidder, 2000; Irwin, 1999; Wood, 1999). Some members of face-to-face straightedge groups often use the internet to gather and disseminate information about straightedge music and cultural events (Higgins, 1999). But the internet is also responsible for diffusing the subculture and facilitating the entry of non-punk/hardcore youth into straightedge sites. Many of these non-punk/hardcore members reported that the internet forums were the only subcultural resource that they utilised, either because of their relative isolation from face-to-face straightedge groups (i.e. geographic location) or their dislike of punk/hardcore music. For many straightedgers, the internet acted as a substitute for music as a culturally cohesive glue that binds the individual to the group. We may replace Frith's 'music' with 'the internet' to understand how subcultural cyberspace does not merely 'reflect the people, but how it produces them, how it creates an experience' (Frith, 1996: 109).

Subcultural cohesiveness on the internet was partially made visible through the ways in which straightedgers constructed subcultural identities *vis-à-vis* dominant culture. The dominant culture was sometimes articulated as youth culture, and other times as mainstream society. Its definition was situational and amorphous. Therefore the dominant culture is analysed in terms of how straightedge youth expressed it, for it is their understandings of it that produced resistant discourse.

(1) Thread: Why call yourself 'Edge?'

Posted by: XbillX

Because I want an identity, and a rebellious one at that, I am not some goody-goody who doesn't do drugs so people like me or any shit, I don't do chemicals because I'm rebelling against a society that wants to pollute my mind and dilute my will. I claim sXe because I'm smart and angry and rebellious, and I will question everything that society tries to force me to swallow. Fight the mind numbing bullshit.

Straightedgers online actively created boundaries between themselves and non-straightedgers. For XbillX, straightedge was about questioning authority, about resistance. It was an identity that was distinct and separate from 'society'. By separating themselves ideologically, straightedgers believed that they could live free from dominant cultural influences. Straightedge was described as activist in nature, yet there was no room for people who were not serious in their commitment to rebel.

(2) Thread: Why call yourself 'Edge?'

Posted by: Bates

I am trying to make a difference in the world and build a scene outside consumer conscience and poison-filled activity. If you don't see the point, don't claim [the label]. Passion fuels my edge to make a better scene.

For Bates, straightedge was about building 'a scene', a subcultural site within which resistance strategies could be shared and solidarity felt. More than being simply drug free, only those willing to try 'to make a difference in the world' were invited to claim the 'Edge'. These two extracts demonstrate how, through the internet forums, participants explicitly defined their resistance to dominant culture. But these examples were relatively rare compared with the more mundane, stylistic representations of straightedge that participants used online.

In their analyses of punk style, John Clarke (1976) and Dick Hebdige (1979) each note how subcultural groups appropriate cultural objects from the mainstream and reshape their meanings in terms of their particular subcultural position relative to dominant and parent cultures. This process of bricolage has been identified previously in analyses of perhaps the most distinguishing and enduring sign within the straightedge subculture: the 'X'. In an interview with Beth Lahickey (1998), Minor Threat's vocalist Ian MacKaye describes the origin of the 'X' as a straightedge symbol:

We were in San Francisco, and we played a place called Mubuhay Gardens. They asked us if we were going to drink and we said 'no', and they put an 'X' on our hands. So we came back to Washington DC and went to this nightclub, the 9.30, and said: 'Hey look, we're not going to drink and we will put this "X" on our hand. If you see us drinking, you can throw us out forever. We are not going to drink, we just came to see the music' ... Now at that time, it wasn't supposed to signify straight edge — it was supposed to signify kids ... The markings on the hands were just what kids in Washington DC had to deal with just to see music, to be free. (Lahickey, 1998: 99)

While originally the 'X' was used by club and bar owners to differentiate legal from under-age customers in order to regulate the sell of alcohol, straight punks appropriated the sign and imbued it with the meaning of youth (i.e. the price of freedom). From a dominant cultural perspective, the 'X' marked off youth as outsiders to be treated differently, but the mark was embraced by straight punks and used to symbolise both an insider status (subculturally) and resistance to what

XbillX called 'mind numbing' behaviours. The meaning of the 'X' has since been modified by straightedgers to signify the straightedge subculture itself. The 'X' can be found on the covers of music recordings, patched or painted on to book bags and backpacks, and tattooed on the skin of male and female straightedgers (Atkinson, 2003). The 'X' is also worn by straightedgers at school and in other public places as a symbol of their subcultural affiliation.

(3) Thread: Do you wear Xs started by xXxLoRixXx?

Posted by: MeanBug

Do you wear Xs on your hands? Sometimes? Always? Why or why not?

I wear my Xs constantly ... I don't feel it is necessary but I like to do it as a reminder to myself & other ppl. What about everyI else?

The 'X' is arguably the best visual representation of straightedge identity in 'real life' and was similarly used by participants online. For MeanBug, it carried a distinct meaning of resistance and visibly marked her/him off from other youth. The 'X' was also a subcultural identifier online that marked participants as in-group members. The username of the participant who started the thread in Extract (3), xXxLoRixXx, was embedded within a pair of triple-'X's, similar to the username in Extract (1). On beginning this research it immediately became clear that some participants displayed aspects of their straightedge identities through various stylistic means such as this. Other newcomers noted it as well.

(4) Thread: The 'X'

Posted by: XxBeachBunnyxX

Hey, notice ALMOST everyone on here has an x before or after on their names. okay maybe you noticed it a long time ago but i'm new here. its cool to finally find a place where they don't ask 'hey, how come you got xs on your name?'

A sign of resistance to a drug-promoting and drug-using dominant culture, the 'X' carried special meaning for straightedge youth and they appreciated a cyberspace within which others shared similar understandings of its subcultural meaning. Members of the straightedge internet site reported not having to worry about questions they often received in face-to-face interaction with out-group members such as 'Does XXX mean you like porn?' or 'Is that X on your hand from going to a bar last night?' Like the 'X' drawn or tattooed on the bodies of straightedgers, many participants placed their usernames inside Xs in order to highlight and make obvious their straightedge identities. Straightedgers alternatively used one, two or three Xs in straightedge symbolism online, though only stylistic preference seemed to account for the differences. The 'X' served as an immediate marker to other participants that the person who posted the message self-identified as a straightedger. Similar to the 'X', 'sXe' was another symbol that represented straightedge (see Extract (1)), with the 'S' from 'straight' and the 'E' from 'edge' surrounding the

'X'. Modelled after hardcore symbols that display group affiliation (e.g. hXc for 'hardcore'), it is ironic that the straightedge configuration 'sXe' could be pronounced 'sexy'.

The 'X' and occasionally 'sXe' were components of many usernames. Participants also regularly chose usernames that carried personal or collective identity markers beyond the use of the 'X'. The choice of a username was important because it represented the first choice new participants made as members of the internet forums (Talamo and Ligorio, 2001). In discussions about usernames, a majority of participants reported relying on their 'real' name or some derivative thereof. Some relied only on their first or last name as a username, while other participants combined real names with other aspects of subcultural identity, either spelled out (e.g. 'Johnny Hardcore') or enclosed with Xs (e.g. 'XmikeX'). More intriguing were those members who chose usernames that combined straightedge style with central aspects of their social identities, such as the subcultural usernames 'XiamstraightedgeX', 'XpunkgrrlX', 'XHardlineGrrlX' and 'XpoisonfreeX', the ethnic username 'sXe_chicana', the vegan usernames 'XmeatlessX' and 'XveganX' and the religious usernames 'XCHRISTIANX' and 'XmonkX'. Still others created usernames that combined straightedge style with aspects of personal identity, such as 'XopenXmindedX' and 'XscreamingemotionsX'.

In addition to choosing personalised usernames, a second form of display was readily apparent. Signature files (or sig.files) are short text files created as a standard appendage at the end of an electronic message such as an email or a BBS post. Other cyber researchers have previously noted the importance of understanding the ways in which sig.files are used to contextualise identity claims and to make certain aspects of personal and social identities salient online (Schleef, 1996; Talamo and Ligorio, 2001; Travers, 2000). Like participants' usernames, sig.files accompanied every post made in a forum thread. The more active a participant was, the more often this stylistic aspect of resistance was projected into the forum's social space. Users regularly developed sig.files that provided information about their subcultural affiliation and served as a means of communicating subcultural resistance. But unlike usernames, which had to be very short, sig.files provided an open space for participants to further articulate aspects of subcultural identity and resistance.

Sig.files symbolised aspects of the straightedge subculture *vis-à-vis* dominant culture in various ways. I sent private messages to participants whose sig.files were particularly expressive and asked them to describe what the sig.file meant to them. Participants tended to make statements about resistance in one of two ways. Some sig.files represented a passive and non-violent stance towards non-straightedgers.

- (5) **x living well is the best revenge x**
- (6) **When All The World Has Fallen Down Around Me, I Know My Beliefs Will Keep Me Standing**
- (7) **never have, never will. long live sXe**

In Extract (5) above, straightedge (made explicit by the Xs which enclosed the quotation) represented a reaction to dominant culture. To be sure, straightedgers believe in 'living well' by steering clear of certain social behaviours, implicitly alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, as well as promiscuity. The sig.file's author described it this way:

I use it online and in my daily life because it succinctly says what I feel makes being drug free so damn nice. Living well, to me, is to live without buying into the youth culture of drugs and alcohol, along with promiscuous sex with multiple partners. And I truly feel like it is the best revenge, because instead of violently forcing others to live my clean life, I happily sit back and survive.

In her sig.file, the straightedge lifestyle was to be understood as a reaction to something ('the best revenge'), though the reaction was positive ('living well') versus negative (i.e. 'forcing others to live my clean life'). Similarly, in the sig.file from Extract (6), straightedgers were raised to a position above the dominant culture through emphasising that strong beliefs would lead to success ('my beliefs will keep me strong') in comparison with the imminent demise of non-straightedgers. Resistance took the form of subcultural beliefs which would guarantee defence against a failing dominant culture. Extract (7) likewise focused on the centrality of straightedge subcultural values for daily life. The sig.file's author proudly displayed her/his lifelong rejection of dominant cultural expectations ('never have, never will'), the specifics of which were taken for granted, while explicitly supporting an alternative, subcultural frame ('long live sXe').

At the same time, there were sig.files that displayed more dramatic reactionary stances towards not only dominant culture, but towards radical versions of the straightedge subculture. In the next three sig.files, resistance was displayed in terms of (re)action.

(8) I wasn't born with enough middle fingers

(9) i just can't tolerate all the shit i see

(10) THUGS NOT DRUGS : I carve Xs into people's backs

In Extract (8), the participant identified her/himself as someone who took a public stand (giving their 'middle fingers') against something, though again that something remained unstated. Within the context of the internet forum one interpretation was that the participant was stylistically portraying a determination to stand out from the crowd by publicly decrying behaviour that she/he rejected. The middle finger served as a poignant and confrontational (yet non-violent) way to express rejection of dominant cultural norms. Extract (9) pronounced that tolerance was not a characteristic of its straightedge author. A person with no tolerance would seem to be one most likely to take action against that to which s/he objected. Thus this sig.file represented a potentially violent form of resistance towards non-straightedge behaviours. However, its author reported intending it as a declaration of disgust at how school peers engaged in, for example, drug use, rather than as a plan for violent reaction.

The idea behind the third sig.file, 'thugs not drugs', appeared at first as a call to straightedgers to unite as an antagonist group that actively opposed drug users ('thug' being defined alternatively as either a ruffian, a cutthroat or an aggressive young criminal). Most radical was the second line: 'I carve Xs into people's backs'. This held reference to the 1995 slashing by Salt Lake City, USA straightedgers of an 'X' into a youth's back for smoking marijuana (Lee-Shanok, 1997). It was impossible to read whether the sig.file's author meant to use this as a ironic form of questioning the violence of radical straightedgers or as support for such violence, especially given the fact that both militant and non-militant straightedgers frequented the online forums. When I sent a message to the individual asking if he would elaborate on its meaning, he replied:

thugs not drugs is a song by *youthful offenders*. i put it in my sig because there was someone on the [forums] with 'hugs not drugs' and someone with 'pugs not drugs'. no real deep meaning. i was just being a jackass. 'i carve xs into people's backs' is meant to be tongue and cheek. it was a sarcastic response to ... allegations that I'm a militant.

The sig.file thus turned out to be a component of the internet forum's inner-politics; the user was using his sig.file as a way of simultaneously resisting being labeled a 'militant' by parodying other forum participants and resisting the idea of engaging in violence towards non-straightedgers.

Taken together, usernames and sig.files provided some initial impressions about the ways in which subcultural style was used online to help members construct meaningful subcultural identities. Usernames and sig.files represented individualised attempts at resistance to both dominant (e.g. youth or 'mainstream') and parent (e.g. punk) cultures. For individuals in the online forums, forms of virtual style were used within a subcultural space that at the same time enabled and constrained the ways in which that resistance was articulated. Such articulations were firstly conjunctural: participants used computer and internet tools to craft and display styles that demonstrated their resistance to a perceived dominant culture in ways not necessarily available in face-to-face straightedge groups. Such style-displays simultaneously marked them as 'insiders' and facilitated their acceptance by other members. Style-displays were secondly contextual and were made possible by the specific social situations within which members found themselves. Straightedgers online were able to adapt sig.files and possibly change their usernames to stylistically resist what they saw as wrong, and many regularly changed their sig.files to display shifting attitudes or emotions. Styles were appropriated, individualised, and sometimes inverted to dramatise and exaggerate specific aspects of social life which members saw as problematic.

Conclusions

David Muggleton (2000: 48) suggests that 'the very concept of subculture is becoming less applicable in postmodernity, for the breakdown of mass society has ensured that there is no longer a coherent dominant culture against which a subculture can express its resistance'. His claim problematises Hebdige's work in *Subculture*,

which deals with how meanings are communicated through style both to subcultural members and to the rest of society. My exploration of a single straightedge group on the internet suggests that subcultural members are still concerned with creating identities that locate them relationally to other subcultural members and the larger culture in which they find themselves.

Straightedgers online used subcultural style to communicate aspects of personal and collective identity through their usernames as well as through sig.files. Through the characters they typed on computer screens, participants engaged in a politics of resistance that empowered them in ways that perhaps were not possible in the face-to-face world. Their style enabled them to cast themselves in terms that emphasised their individuality *vis-à-vis* the mainstream and their similarity to subculturally similar others. Yet the dominant culture they resisted was amorphous and remained largely hidden from view. Straightedge was articulated by members alternately as a reaction to either consumer culture, youth culture, punk/hardcore culture, or some combination of them. The various ways in which straightedgers took up and defined their resistance demonstrate the diffusion of perspectives from within the subculture. Thus perhaps the idea of a mainstream 'dominant culture' has become tenable only as a construct that subculturalists use to mark themselves as different, for 'the critical point is not that style cannot resist ... but contests between resistance and conformity do not conform to a single line between the subordinate and the hegemonic' (Crook et al., 1992, cited in Muggleton, 2000: 48). Future research should analyse the concept of resistance in terms of straightedge's conservative value- and belief-system, for it seemed almost paradoxical at times that youth who saw themselves as so anti-mainstream would embrace values reminiscent of orthodox religions.

The research presented suggests some of the ways in which cultural studies theory can inform research into the uses of the internet. It also demonstrates how theory is continually being made and refined and that no theory is good enough as it stands. This relates to one particular criticism of 1970s cultural studies work, that semiotic analysis is inadequate for the interpretation of (in this case, virtual) cultural signs (Muggleton, 2000; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). A semiotic analysis of the last sig.file above ('THUGS NOT DRUGS: I carve Xs into people's backs'), for example, would probably not have resulted in a useful interpretation of its meaning, for the semiotician would not have asked the subculturalist what the sig.file meant *to him*. In fact, a purely semiotic reading could have resulted in a negative label being attached to the sig.file's author and potentially to the subcultural group as a whole. And, while intra-subcultural politics should become visible at some level to the 'observation ethnographer' as a result of the amount of time spent online in the forums, there is no guarantee that an accurate meaning of the sig.file could have been deduced without asking. In fact, my initial 'reading' of its meaning turned out to be quite wrong once I collected more data. Similarly, work in the semiotic tradition of the CCCS would not have found these politics from an analysis of the 'surfaces of the subculture' alone (Hebdige, 1979: 2).

Style is more than just surfaces. It is chosen by individuals to represent certain aspects of their personal and collective identities. Styles conform broadly to

subcultural boundaries but are nevertheless individualised by members and highlight social psychological aspects of subcultural participation. Style represents more than a 'profoundly superficial level of appearances' (Hebdige, 1979: 17): it represents the values and beliefs that underlie stylistic preferences and which guide subsequent behaviour. It is for these reasons that ethnographic research on subcultures is necessary to expose the meanings which early cultural studies left untouched.

This raises two closing points. First, while some earlier cultural studies work is useful for contemporary cultural analysis, it must not be used uncritically. Cyberspaces such as the internet follow some of the same rules as the face-to-face world, but cyberspaces offer the potential of escape from that world as well. Issues of identification still must be dealt with on the internet, but they can be resisted in new ways. Cultural studies theories that have been developed using data from face-to-face social life must therefore be interrogated before being employed in non-face-to-face research sites like the internet. Lastly, research into the uses of the internet should not be limited to surface readings. Instead, cultural studies researchers need to continue developing ethnographic (and other) tools that get at individuals' and groups' cultural experiences in cyberspace.

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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Heith Copes, the editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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