"How Edge Are You?" Constructing Authentic Identities and Subcultural Boundaries in a Straightedge Internet Forum

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We analyze how participants in an internet forum dedicated to the straight-edge subculture articulate and express subcultural identities and boundaries, with particular attention to how they accomplish these tasks in a computer-mediated context. Through participant observation, "focused discussions," and interviews, we explore the complexity of identity-making processes in terms of cyberspace and subculture, conceptualizing identification as occurring at the intersection of biography, subculture, and technology. We find that the internet influences how individuals participate in subcultural communities by analyzing their claims for authenticity and how they position themselves in relation to subcultural boundaries. This article provides insight into the dialectic relationship between participation in a subculture and in an internet community.

When it comes to matters of straightedge, politics, music and just learning about people, this forum has been an oasis of wisdom and good times. I would never base my existence on just people on the web; that would drive me crazy. . . . The point is that online buddies from other places in the world can really broaden your horizon. . . . Have you noticed how wonderfully different we all are on this [forum]? All the way from New Zealand to Holland, by England over to the States, we have so much knowledge, we have so many illnesses to discuss, we have problems, we have solutions to them, we have good and bad advice and we have tons of opinions on anything. (Posted online by XsvenX)

Judging by the increasing volume of research dedicated to this topic, "life on the screen" (Turkle 1995) has become an important aspect of everyday life for a growing

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number of youths across the world. In spite of this increasing interest, we know little about how subcultural youth experience life online. Regardless of the subculture they participate in, they use the internet to develop new relationships and to gain insights into how their peers perform subcultural selves.

As social life has become more fractured, fragmented, and isolating, subcultures have become more visible and varied as collective reactions to what Moore (1998) terms a "crisis of meaningfulness." For many people, finding meaning in life is becoming increasingly difficult. According to Grossberg (1992:222), "it is not that nothing matters—for something has to matter—but that there is no way of choosing, or of finding something to warrant the investment." Subcultural participation is one consequence of this search for meaning. Yet for youth especially, subcultural membership often involves a process of stigmatization. Subcultural youth are often seen as contentious, rebellious, uninformed, and uncaring and are generally constructed as the cultural other, set apart from both children and adults in terms of values, beliefs, and ethics (Arnett 2000; Epstein 1998; Gaines 1991; Hebdige 1988; Wooden and Blazak 2001).

In *Delinquent Boys* (1955), Cohen introduces his conceptualization of subculture, wherein individuals with similar problems who interact with one another may develop solutions to collectively experienced social problems by developing an alternative frame of reference. Conceptualized as both social psychological and cultural, this frame of reference provides individuals with a subcultural identity. The process of finding other people who will accept one's identity, however, is not a simple one in contemporary society. First, larger social and geographic conditions must be right for individuals to locate and interact with each other. Several social theorists have argued that these proper conditions are becoming rarer and have characterized contemporary society by a dearth of place-based communities (e.g., Putnam 2000). Second, who associates with whom also depends on how individuals "shop around" to find "kindred souls":

> [C]ircumstances may limit this process of mutual gravitation of people with like problems and free and spontaneous communication among them. People with like problems may be so separated by barriers of physical space or social convention that the probability of mutual exploration and discovery is small. Free choice of associates may be regulated by persons in power, as parents may regulate the associates of their children. (Cohen 1955:70–71)

The internet offers a means to overcome such barriers by minimizing or eliminating geographic and parental control barriers. Youth, who are among the most avid internet users (Cyberatlas 2002), are constantly expanding their social worlds through interaction that does not require copresence (instant messaging, online gaming, bulletin board systems, and internet chat rooms, to name a few). Stone (1991:111) calls these cyberspaces "flexible, lively, and practical adaptations to the real circumstances that confront persons seeking community. . . . They are part of a range of innovative solutions to the drive for sociality—a drive that can be frequently thwarted by . . . geographical and cultural realities." Implicit in both Cohen and Stone is

the idea that certain segments of the population have problems finding and/or keeping meaningful social relationships and, as a result, seek alternative means of being together.

Researchers have yet to pay adequate attention to the internet as a social space where subcultural communities emerge, develop, and change. Although the social scientific literature on the internet has burgeoned during the past decade, few studies have examined the phenomenon of subcultures online. Our research investigates this gap in the literature. We focus on a single straightedge internet site in order to provide new insights into how individuals develop subcultural identities in computer-mediated contexts.

THE STRAIGHTEDGE SUBCULTURE

Straightedge emerged as an offshoot of the punk subculture in the early 1980s in the United States and now claims worldwide adherents. The term "straightedge" can be traced to a 1981 song entitled "Straight Edge" by the Washington, D.C., band Minor Threat.[1] Its lyrics state:

> I'm a person just like you, but I've got better things to do than . . . snort white shit up my nose, pass out at shows . . . than sit around and smoke dope because I know that I can cope. Always want to be in touch, never want to use a crutch. I've got the straight edge! (Minor Threat 1981b)

The term was taken up by an emerging youth subculture whose members actively resist what they see as consumer-driven and self-indulgent youth cultures, including the nihilism and apathy of many punks. Minor Threat's songs, like most straightedge music, are fast-paced, with simple and repetitive power-driven chords; the lyrics stand in stark contrast to a mainstream consumerist ideology purveyed in popular radio hits. Along with other punk bands from the 1980s, such as Nevada's Seven Seconds, Massachusetts's SS Decontrol and DYS, and California's Uniform Choice, Minor Threat combined the speed and energy of punk music with upbeat and activist lyrics.

Minor Threat provided more than just the name of the subculture. A song on their second 7-inch EP provided a rudimentary ideology. In "Out of Step," the vocalist Ian MacKaye claims, "I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't fuck, at least I can fucking think. I can't keep up. . . . Out of step with the world" (Minor Threat 1981a). These lyrics became the founding "rules" for the straightedge subculture and were based on "a deep hatred for [the] lifestyle" of participants in larger youth cultures of the early 1980s (MacKaye, quoted in Small and Stuart 1982). Straightedge emerged as a conservative reaction to anarchy; it called on punks to renounce drug use and promiscuity and thereby maintain a "straight edge" over their mainstream peers (see Lahickey 1998). Thus straightedge came to be viewed by many pundits (including some punks) as a perverse form of Ronald Reagan's neoconservative politics "that went from being a minor threat to a conservative, conformist no threat" (O'Hara 1999:142). The subculture is populated mainly by white males and

females between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five from moderately religious, middle-class families.

Since 1981 straightedge subculture has developed into a complex discourse that varies among straightedge networks (or scenes) as well as among members within the same scene. Using music lyrics to represent subcultural frames of reference, Wood (1999) has mapped some of this variation in straightedge subculture. He notes that within a decade of its genesis, various straightedge scenes and individuals adopted radically different frames. Some incorporated a militant frame of reference toward outsiders and see themselves as soldiers engaged in a war. Others see straightedge as encompassing vegetarian-vegan ethics, an anticorporate or do-it-yourself ethic, animal rights activism, and religious cultism, including Krishna Consciousness (Tyler 1997). These frames of reference are not mutually exclusive but overlap and combine in unique ways in and across local straightedge scenes.

In recent years straightedge has extended beyond face-to-face punk music scenes into cyberspace. Straightedgers now gather in chat rooms, post on internet bulletin board forums, trade music MP3s, and publish internet infozines and fanzines. In this respect, participants use the internet both as a subcultural resource and as a medium for participation. The internet provides a place where straightedgers can reach people throughout the world whom they might never meet in person, allowing them to construct and express identities for themselves and others. It also acts as a communication interlock, a nexus through which members communicate and negotiate subcultural symbols outside traditional music-based networks.

SUBCULTURE AND BOUNDARIES

We see subcultures as culturally bounded (but not closed) networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction. Over time, members' interactions develop into a discourse that structures the generation, activation, and diffusion of these ideas, objects, and practices. We do not conceptualize subcultures as having rigid boundaries but rather, following Fine and Kleinman (1979), we are interested in how actors transmit subcultural components via a series of communication interlocks, social linkages or conduits within and among local networks. The concept of interlocks highlights the ways in which a subculture spreads from one area to another but does not restrict the subculture to a particular group or area.

Fine and Kleinman (1979) identify four types of communication interlocks. First, they note that subcultural members are simultaneously members of multiple networks, which (second) involves maintaining weak social ties with many other people. An individual's social ties within and among multiple networks facilitate the flow of information across subcultural boundaries. Third, cultural information can be spread by individuals or groups who inhabit key structural roles. The role of musician, for example, is one through which subculturally relevant information may spread to multiple subcultural scenes as well as outside subcultural networks, for

example, through lyrics. Fourth, information is transmitted back and forth across subcultural boundaries via mass media. Information about a subculture is disseminated to nonmembers, such as when a journalist reports on a local straightedge scene, or when subculturalists bring mass-mediated information to bear in subcultural interaction. Together, these communication interlocks help to explain how information about a subculture is disseminated outside a local network as well as how new ideas and values are transmitted into a network and help bring about subcultural diffusion and change.

According to Fine (1983), individuals identify themselves as participants in a particular subculture by interacting with subcultural and nonsubcultural members alike, as well as with subcultural symbols. An individual constructs a subcultural self through meaningful interaction with other individuals who may or may not agree on subcultural ideas and practices. Although identification is crucial for understanding participants' perceptions of the boundaries of a subculture, Fine and Kleinman's (1979) work on conceptualizing subculture does not develop a detailed discussion of identity-making processes.

Identity theorists have recently drawn on each other's work to produce more robust conceptualizations of identity and identification (e.g., Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Thoits and Virshup 1997). These works provide complementary understandings of the self concept (Stets and Burke 2000) and posit the self as reflexive and as mediating the relationships among the individual, culture, and society. As developed in the symbolic interactionist tradition, identity theorists use the concept of roles to conceptually link individuals with social structures. Roles can be defined as the general expectations and norms attached to self-identifications (Stryker and Statham 1985), which (re)produce sociocultural structures and which function to define boundaries (Stryker 1997). Boundaries in turn "encourage interaction within [a] setting and thus foster the development and exercise of identities consistent with the structure" (Deaux and Martin 2003:103).

A clearer conceptualization of boundaries further emphasizes their sociological relevance for understanding identity (Lamont 2001a, 2001b). Theories of social comparison have focused on how the desire to positively evaluate one's self leads to the construction of cognitive boundaries that differentiate those who are similar to us from those who are different (Rosenberg and Kaplan 1982). Sociologists such as Jenkins (1996) describe identity in terms of a dialectic between internal and external definitions of self, with symbolic boundaries functioning to establish personal and collective identities. These theories implicitly reference the boundary concept in terms of its social psychological functions. When studying subcultures, the boundary concept is likewise useful for highlighting the social processes, rather than cultural differences, that distinguish subcultural "insiders" from "outsiders." Researchers who focus only on cultural differences among groups risk reifying boundaries as natural and unproblematic (Barth 1969). A symbolic interactionist approach to boundaries emphasizes the contexts and interactions through which boundaries are organized, as well as the cultural repertoires, narratives, and practices on which

individuals rely to construct them (Thorne 1993). Our research underscores how individuals who inhabit the same subcultural space create, negotiate, and transcend subcultural boundaries.

IDENTITY AND CYBERSPACE

The literature on identity and cyberspace is replete with a discourse on boundaries. Much of it is a kind of utopian rhetoric in which "new technology promises to deliver its users from the constraints and defeats of physical reality and the physical body" (Robins 2000:81). Though we question the validity of such a technotopian vision of the future, it is safe to agree with researchers who suggest that cyberspatial experiences highlight the boundaries between physical and computer-mediated spaces, as well as socially constructed boundaries among categories of people (Turkle 1995). Historically relevant boundaries that maintain hierarchies of status, class, gender, and race remain important online (Kendall 1998), but they become somewhat undermined, since the articulation of one's views in writing is the most important method for expressing an identity (Coate 1997; Waskul 2003).

The internet is a particularly useful "expressive" space for people to experiment with identity. According to Turkle (1995), the ability to be anonymous on the internet empowers us to play with how we present ourselves, and to transgress boundaries that we experience in the face-to-face world. Extending from Erikson's concept of psychological moratorium, Turkle argues that people use the internet as a space where identities, grounded in particular sets of norms, beliefs, and values, can be played out without the same kinds of fears that might exist offline. Turkle's emphasis on the association between anonymity and identity construction, however, suggests that identity-making processes in cyberspace are relatively inconsequential to life off the screen. If others reject an online presentation of self, an individual can simply avoid or ignore many of the negative consequences that might accompany rejection in less anonymous circumstances.

In contrast, some researchers have focused on the consequences of identity processes online. For example, studies of identity politics focus on collective identifications that separate "us" from "them." Zickmund's (2000) work on racist internet sites highlights how members identify outsiders in subcultural discourse. As she argues, racist subcultures are historically close-knit, community-based groups that socially construct a subcultural image of themselves vis-à-vis the "other." Mitra's (2000) study of identity in Indian cyberspaces focuses similar attention on the distinctions among various ethnic, religious, and national categories. The other represents danger and symbolizes an impetus for collective action. Most significantly, such empirical research focuses on how the construction of the other is facilitated online. Cultural boundaries online are often porous, with little or no restrictions placed on who may register or interact within a community. Thus outsiders regularly penetrate subcultural sites, condemning or "flaming" (Dery 1994) subcultural members, who in turn post reactionary messages. These interactional moments provide the

opportunity for multiple actors to construct meaningful identities and cultural boundaries.

Expressing subcultural identities on-line is part of the identity work individuals perform in their everyday lives (Denzin 1998). Identity online is not separate from the face-to-face world but rather complements and supplements it. The identity processes we discuss below are similar in many respects to face-to-face processes. As Waskul (2003:24) makes clear, "participants' claims to online experiences, self, and communities should be perceived as existing through the same processes of communication and interaction by which any other experience, self, or community emerges, is maintained, and is transformed in everyday life." Yet, as Waskul also points out, the medium does influence how individuals express and consume subcultural identities in unique ways. In the analysis that follows, we highlight some of the ways that subculturalists articulate authentic identities and boundaries in an internet forum. We also emphasize the impact of the medium on subculturalists' narratives and interactions. However, we do not want to overemphasize the internet as a "virtual" social space. Interaction online, like offline, takes many forms and should be conceptualized as another (ever-increasing) aspect of our everyday lives.

METHODS AND DATA

The internet forum we examine is dedicated to the straightedge subculture. This forum fits previous definitions of an online community as it has its own "norms, its rules (netiquette), its own emotional vocabulary—guidelines for posting, acceptable subjects, regular users, leaders, oldtimers, and a constant circulation of newcomers" (Denzin 1998:99–100). The website utilizes an asynchronous bulletin board service, wherein individuals post messages in forums that anyone with an internet connection and a Web browser can access. Participants can interact with one another by clicking on "threads" within each forum. Threads are textual conversations that are organized chronologically on the forum's webpages and constitute its "conversational life" (Denzin 1999:114). Once they choose a thread, participants read the statements or questions posted by other participants and add their own voices to the conversation if they choose. When a participant posts in the forum, she or he is identified by username.[2] These posts are cultural artifacts that are amenable to empirical content analysis. Symbolic interactionists have already begun to study these online interactions (Denzin 1998, 1999; Kendall 1998; Waskul 2003). Denzin (1999:110) describes them as "cybernarratives[,] . . . moments when an utterance intersects with another utterance, giving rise to an instance of the system of action."

Our analysis of posts consists of multiple phases because the forum itself has had multiple phases punctuated by server crashes that resulted in the loss of the forum's data. Our analysis thus focuses on two separate iterations of the forum: the first existed between February and September 2001; the second, between October 2001 and March 2003. We collected data using two methodological strategies that Bainbridge (2000:57) calls "observation ethnography" and "informant ethnography." The

former is an unobtrusive research role in which we conducted content analysis of forum threads without focused interaction with participants. During the observation ethnographic phase, Patrick (the first author) analyzed the first message of every thread posted on the forum ($n = 285$) between February 2001 and September 2001, when it crashed, using interpretive and ethnographic content analysis methods (Altheide 1996). He saved each thread as a text file and imported it into QSR NVivo, a computer application designed to handle and interpret qualitative data (Welsh 2002).

During our analysis of these early posts, we noticed that straightedgers online were often writing about the same focal concerns that other researchers have previously noted as central subcultural topics. A review of the straightedge literature shows that in addition to music, the rejection of drugs and promiscuity and, increasingly, support for animal rights are important subcultural issues (Irwin 1999; Wood 1999). However, rather than assume that previous research on face-to-face straightedge groups would provide us with an accurate portrayal of what straightedge participants online would also consider important, we wanted to find out what straightedgers themselves were writing about in their online conversations. Therefore, using individual posts as the unit of analysis, we began coding posts from the 2001 iteration of the forum using a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2000). Although Patrick was initially interested in mapping how participants talked about subcultural norms and values, he soon discovered that there was a significant amount of discussion about subcultural identity—namely, what kinds of people were or were not considered "really" straightedge and what kinds of behaviors were or were not appropriate for straightedgers. Informed by these topics, we began to develop emergent coding schemes to categorize our initial understandings of what was theoretically significant.

Our second strategy, informant ethnography, was interactive. Here, we used the themes that emerged during our initial coding phase (patterns of affiliation, claims of authenticity, adherence to rules, and mechanisms of boundary maintenance) to start "focused discussions"—new thread topics for the participants to respond to. For example, we started threads that asked participants about their affiliation with straightedge, their understandings of subcultural rules, and their opinions about mainstream culture. By monitoring the threads daily, we could guide conversations, bring them back on track when participants strayed off topic, ask follow-up questions based on initial responses, and request participation from those who might be following a discussion but who may not have posted. During this stage of the data collection, we acted as regular participants of the forum. When participants posted messages we regularly posted our own ideas, opinions, and beliefs about certain aspects, regardless of whether we agreed or disagreed with the participants. This stage of the analysis lasted from October 2001 to March 2003. We started seventeen focused discussion threads, which ended up containing 972 posts. We analyzed these posts in the same way as previous, nonsolicited posts, that is, further developing our coding scheme through constant comparison of forum data. These focused discussions

contained a large number of total posts, but many of them consisted of simple expressions of agreement or disagreement. In addition, we continued to monitor other threads in the forum. Our analysis below includes data from five other threads that were relevant to our research interests.

During the informant ethnographic phase, Patrick interviewed nine key informants in order to gain clarification on the meaning of subcultural forms and activities. He selected key informants according to their level of participation (measured by total number of posts), the extent to which he noticed their participation in specific threads, or the opinions they expressed. Patrick interviewed the website's owner-administrator, individuals who posted regularly over a long period, as well as some people who posted frequently for a short time before quitting. He included both participants who identified themselves as straightedgers and those who did not. Interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes, and all took place online using either an Instant Messaging (IM) or Internet Relay Chat (IRC) program, both of which are popular among young Internet users (Cyberatlas 2002). Patrick developed his interview schedule along themes that emerged from earlier analysis (i.e., affiliation, authenticity, rules, and boundaries) but left it semistructured so that he could develop and change questions as the research progressed and new areas of interest emerged.

Early in the informant ethnographic stage, Patrick posted a message in the forums stating that he was a researcher who was analyzing the textual conversations in which people engaged. Heith (the second author) was a participant observer throughout 2002 and 2003 but did not explicitly identify himself as a researcher. To ensure that participants understood what the research project was about, Patrick typed a short description of the research plan and the website's owner-administrator pinned it as a message at the top of the forum's main page. He made clear that he would change the usernames of all participants and not disclose the website's address so as to protect users' online identities. Anonymity was promised to all participants, thus ensuring that individual voices have been protected to the fullest extent possible. Patrick invited participants who wanted to know more about the research project or who did not want to be involved to contact him to discuss any problems or fears they might have or to opt out of being included in the research. Participants viewed the message 416 times during 2002 and 2003; one participant sent a message asking that her or his posts not be included in the research.

EXPRESSING AUTHENTIC IDENTITIES ONLINE

When subculturalists interact with one another it is important for them to appear authentic. Subculturalists regularly claim to "be" real while charging others with simply dressing or speaking certain ways in order to appear cool or to fit in (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990). Those unable to convey their authenticity are often labeled as poseurs, pretenders, wannabes, or weekenders (Fox 1987; Yablonski 1968). When interacting face-to-face with other subcultural members, it is possible to express

one's authenticity through a variety of ways, including argot, style of dress, and be-havior. In the internet forum, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify other users in such embodied terms. While the straightedge forum allows partici-pants to express some level of style (Williams 2003), the primary way to show others one's authenticity is to articulate a subcultural identity through text. Participants in the straightedge forum do not agree on what constitutes this authenticity. Faced with the diverse beliefs about straightedge expressed online and the lack of face-to-face information about each other, they often articulate their authenticity by em-phasizing either their participation in a straightedge scene or their adherence to a straightedge lifestyle.

Articulating Participation in a Community

The topic of claiming Edge[3] is the subject of many posts in the online forum. Be-cause many of the forum participants are relatively new to straightedge, they seek out stories about what straightedge means to other participants in order to frame their own expressions of straightedge identity. During our participant observation, we noticed some antagonism among various participants. This antagonism revolves around the issue of authenticity—who has the "right" to claim to be straightedge. Authenticity itself is not an objective category. Rather, participants construct sym-bolic boundaries as a means of differentiating themselves as authentic from certain other forum participants whom they see as poseurs. Some define an authentic straightedge identity solely in terms of participation in a face-to-face straightedge music scene. For these participants, the internet forum is a *supplement* for their face-to-face participation in the subculture. For example, they discuss what straight-edgers in other parts of the world do in their everyday lives, share information about straightedge bands, or ask for local support when their bands are touring. While they glean information in the forum to enhance their involvement in face-to-face straightedge scene, they make it clear that authentic straightedgers are those involved directly in a face-to-face scene.

Other forum participants do not consider membership in a face-to-face straight-edge music scene as a requirement for being straightedge. Rather, they define au-thenticity in terms of adherence to the subculture's core values, such as abstaining from drugs and promiscuous sexual activity. In the following post,[4] Nebula ques-tions the roots of authentic straightedge identity.

> Let's go like this: [another participant] heard "Straight Edge" by Minor Threat. He heard about sXe from bands and his friends. . . . A girl who listens to Korn [a "new metal" band that is not straightedge] would like to be part of a philosophy that embraces anti-drugs. She hears about it from the internet. . . . A boy who lis-tens to Metallica & Megadeath ["heavy metal" bands that are not straightedge] gets made fun of because he doesn't do pot. He finds someone . . . who tells him about sXe. He decides to . . . hang out with the other kid as to make a statement about not doing drugs.

Nebula gives three hypothetical cases in which a person is exposed to and expresses support for a drug-free lifestyle. In each case, the source of information about straightedge is different. His post serves as a challenge to other participants—a challenge to prove why one person is more or less authentic than another.

In other posts, many participants express their conviction that an individual can be straightedge without participating in a face-to-face straightedge music scene. For instance, MeanBug posts:

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

MeanBug simultaneously claims an authentic subcultural identity and offers an account of why she does not participate in a face-to-face straightedge scene. There are six replies to her post. In one of them, a straightedge music fan suggests that she rethink her "official" claim. Each of the five subsequent posts seeks to invalidate this participant's position and to support MeanBug's identity claim.

These posts signify the importance of the internet as a communication interlock. The internet forum functions as a space where people who affiliate with straightedge can come together to interact, regardless of what form the affiliation takes. This fact often comes as a surprise to those who primarily interact with other straightedgers in a face-to-face scene. For example, xpeterx posts:

> I find it really strange that a lot of straight edge kids on these forums aren't into hardcore, this is something I've never seen! . . . We have Nu-metal edgers, Ska edgers, even Doom, Goth & Black Metal sXe! . . . It just goes to show what a cool movement sXe has become, progressing into something more that just a [punk] offshoot!!!

Though the plethora of music subcultures listed here may be confusing to those unfamiliar with them, the participant's point is clear: the internet enables individuals with different backgrounds to interact in a single subcultural space. Ultimately, as these interactions about authenticity grow in number in the forum archives each month, more people are likely to encounter them and reinterpret the meaning of subcultural authenticity.

Articulating a Subcultural Lifestyle

The claims of authenticity that forum participants advance must be understood in terms of the internet forum in which they occur. Individuals are interacting in a space specifically created to attract and support straightedge discussion. It is not necessary for them to state unambiguously their straightedge affiliation because the internet site in which they interact makes the subculture highly salient. In fact, threads that are deemed irrelevant by administrators are locked to prevent further

posting or moved from the "Straightedge Discussion" forum to other forums on the website.

The "anonymous" internet (Turkle 1995) is a disembodied medium that facilitates conversations that serve to establish subcultural boundaries between those who share straightedge beliefs and values and those who do not. But these boundaries are not rigid. Indeed, the online forum serves as a meeting space for people who have had very different experiences with straightedge, depending on their biographies and the conditions under which they come to affiliate with the subculture (Lahickey 1998; Wood 2003). As previously mentioned, many participants claim to be members of face-to-face straightedge music scenes, whereas others admit they do not. Further, the straightedge identities that forum participants express overlap with other subcultural identities and affiliations. The forum allows individuals to engage each other about the interpretive cleavages and disjunctures among, on the one hand, various local idiocultures and, on the other, individuals' subjective understandings of the subculture as they arise through participation in the forum.

Many participants express authenticity by focusing on the straightedge lifestyle rather than claiming the label or highlighting membership in a scene. In fact, some claim that strong attachment to the label is evidence of simply "doing" rather than "being" straightedge. These individuals believe it is the core principles of straightedge that are important. They view straightedge as a philosophy for living rather than as a clique to join. Some participants express opposition to those who are too attached to the label and those who want to set narrow parameters on what straightedge means. This became clear to us in several focused discussions on the topic of straightedge identity. In one such discussion, we asked participants why they felt that straightedge was important to them. Ethical Underground writes:

> Unfortunately, kids are sometimes attracted to sXe for the label itself. I see kids trying to be as "edge" and "hardcore" as possible. I myself don't claim the label. I don't feel I need it. You will see a lot of new kids on this forum asking "is this edge?" and shit like that. People are trying to fit into the label of "edge," rather than let being edge fit into themselves. This is what is wrong with sXe.

Terry posts a similar sentiment in another focused discussion:

> A lot of people say that they do not call themselves "straight edge" because they do not like to affiliate themselves with a certain "group." But I feel it's not a group, it is about my life and my future.

Expressions of authenticity can be clearly seen in posts like these, wherein participants refuse to identify themselves in terms of rigid categories. Ethical Underground and Terry both appear to believe that straightedge is an expression of the individual self. Both distinguish the straightedge label from the beliefs that they feel constitute their selves. Like Gottschalk's (1993) "Freaks," they experience straightedge as a lifestyle and as a vehicle for interaction rather than as a sociopolitical orientation that requires membership. However, that they are interacting in a straightedge forum requires them to justify their rejection of the label, once stated. They do

so by highlighting authentic aspects of self that avoid overt claims to category membership (Widdicombe 1998).

Not all participants report that rejecting the straightedge label is necessary or even desirable, and most embrace it and express pride in displaying straightedge symbols to others, as evidenced by, for example, incorporating straightedge symbols into their usernames (Williams 2003). In the following post, Marcus rejects the idea that claiming to be straightedge is merely a means to be part of a group:

> I told someone a while back that I was straight edge. . . . He told me that he has very little respect for someone who just does what someone else tells them to do. Personally, I have my own reasons for being "straight edge," that is, not drinking, not smoking, and not fucking around. I had those reasons even before I knew what "straight edge" was. People post topics, basically asking permission to do some activity. . . . I think topics and questions like these have the right intent, but they're just all wrong. Asking permission to do something with your body in your life goes against everything straight edge is supposed to stand for.

Marcus emphasizes his authenticity by claiming that he felt straightedge even before he knew what the term meant. He expresses his subcultural identity in essentialized terms, as something inside himself that preexisted subcultural affiliation. Because he considers straightedge an individualistic experience, he views people who "[ask] permission to do some activity" negatively. By internalizing straightedge's normative framework as a lifestyle choice, Marcus is able to avoid affiliating with a subculture for inauthentic reasons. Expressing the importance of agency in claiming to be straightedge also highlights the individual's freedom from the community—a value deeply embedded in punk subculture.[5]

Our analysis of authenticity calls into question classic sociological conceptualizations of subcultures. Much early research on youth subcultures conceptualized them in terms of norms, values, and beliefs or in terms of class position (e.g., Cohen 1955; Hall and Jefferson 1975). The result was static and homogeneous conceptualizations of the subcultures in question (see Fine and Kleinman 1979). In contrast, symbolic interactionists emphasize that each participant's perspective on the subculture is unique—an insight that enables the more nuanced understanding that subcultural members "will not internalize or identify with pre-existing culture in exactly the same way, nor will they necessarily construct identical or even similar subcultural identities" (Wood 2003:38).

Participants form the identities we have discussed at the intersection of biography, subculture, and technology. Participants who post messages in the forum construct their identities by using their knowledge of the subculture and their computer-mediated interactions with other forum participants' posts. Posts, conceptualized as subcultural artifacts that outlive the moment when they are created, build up a "discursive environment, [an] interactional domain characterized by distinctive ways of interpreting and representing everyday realities" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000:103). Such an environment is necessarily different from face-to-face interactions because of the internet's anonymous qualities. Anyone who holds a belief about what it

means to "be" straightedge can participate in the construction of this subcultural discourse online. In this way, the internet functions as a new space for the construction of straightedge identity.

CONSTRUCTING SUBCULTURAL BOUNDARIES ONLINE

We have seen that the internet forum facilitates those interactions through which participants construct authentic subcultural identities. In many of these online interactions, straightedgers also construct boundaries to distinguish among members who hold divergent beliefs about the subculture but claim the straightedge label, people who do not claim to be straightedge but follow subcultural rules, and the occasional participant who does not follow subcultural rules. In this section, we study not only how participants use posts to establish their identity but also how these posts function as a repository of subcultural knowledge and subjectivities on which participants draw to construct subcultural boundaries. Our analysis focuses on boundary making and negotiating processes. First, we look at participants' narratives that expose the boundary between straightedge subculture and mainstream culture and explore an example of constructing subcultural boundaries when straightedge participants interact with an outsider. Second, using a series of posts in which a straightedger admits to having broken straightedge norms, we highlight the importance that nonstraightedgers play in the forum.

Interacting with "Outsiders"

Social psychologists have for some time studied how individuals use social comparisons with others to achieve a positive sense of self (Rosenburg and Kaplan 1982; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990). Whether on- or offline, participants who claim the straightedge label use social comparisons in an attempt to view themselves favorably against outsiders, particularly members of "the mainstream." In the forum, participants often express their straightedge-ness through comparisons with "mainstream" youth and adults, whom they describe as weak because they use alcohol and drugs as social crutches. As the following post by XmikeX exemplifies, participants articulate reasons for constructing subcultural identities that ideologically contrast mainstream culture:

> [I use the straightedge label] BECAUSE I want an identity, and a rebellious one at that. I am not some goody-goody who doesn't do drugs so people will 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.

For XmikeX, straightedge is about questioning authority, about resistance. It is a phenomenon that is distinct and separate from mainstream culture. The process of social comparison, however, is more complex than simply claiming to be antimainstream

(Haenfler 2004). For example, other participants also report either having used drugs in the past or having friends or family who did or still do. These participants exhibit various degrees of tolerance toward drug use, depending on their own experiences. It is therefore necessary to consider how individuals, whose networks include nonstraightedgers, construct subcultural boundaries. To accomplish this, we analyze how the internet forum facilitates interactions between straightedgers and the people they consider "outsiders."

In the following thread, straightedge participants react to a post by Nathan, an admitted drug user, who frequented the straightedge discussion forum for several months as he sought support while experimenting with a drug-free lifestyle. In the everyday life of a subcultural forum, posts or messages from outsiders "play a key role in triggering a dialogue, providing a theme, or a sense of vivaciousness needed to continue a discussion" (Zickmund 2000:248). By interacting with drug users, participants who embrace subcultural norms find an opportunity to articulate subcultural boundaries in a space whose anonymity makes it relatively safe to do so.

> Nathan: Now that I've been accepted into this lovely establishment, I wonder if I had any impact or influence, about the way you feel about drug users. My feelings towards straight edge kids has changed for the better, and your influence is inspiring (oh man sobriety, it's been much better now). Just curious.

> xXxCoCoxXx: The drugs users I've met are not people I would like to have a conversation with. How about that? But you seem very cool. But I don't think one person can change what I think about a group of people!

> XamalekX: Well Nathan, I still stand by my general disliking of drug users. Are there more intelligent/accepting ones than there are mindless stupid sheep? If so, then I welcome them with open arms.

> Sourpuss: I have nothing against drug users—it's your life, not mine. I just know, firsthand, how badly a life can be consumed by drug use and know to keep users at arms length—emotionally speaking, of course.

Here we highlight three straightedge responses (out of a total of forty) to Nathan's query regarding how forum participants create boundaries between themselves and others. Nathan had participated in many other threads on the topic of drug use. He had, in our observations, followed basic "netiquette" (Shea 1994), and his posts seemed aimed at building critical dialogue. Nathan's post sets the tone for supportive replies, and he even expresses feeling "welcome" in the forum. In the responses above, however, straightedge participants describe a "general disliking of drug users." Overall, participants express relatively unsympathetic attitudes toward drug users, whom they reference as a negative out-group, as "mindless stupid sheep." Similar sentiments are expressed regularly in the forum, especially in threads in which no drug users post messages.

By comparing oneself with others who behave or believe differently, participants enforce a politics of exclusion against perceived outsiders. According to Travers (2000), the internet is a liminal space that serves to empower the exclusion of others

based on racial, gender, and sexual differences. People are less likely to see other participants as fully human, instead reducing them to the posts they make online. In the straightedge forum, the straightedge discourse works to marginalize outsiders because of their lifestyle choices. Forum participants marginalize Nathan by characterizing all drug users in stereotypical terms. Participants communicate negative stereotypes in their posts, which solidify the other against whom their straightedge identities become relevant and meaningful. Yet each poster also seems to make an exception for Nathan: they are willing to converse online with someone they claim they would not typically converse with offline. It is no surprise that, after debating several points about the costs and benefits of drug use, Nathan stops eliciting responses to his question as other forum participants implicitly identify him as an outsider of the forum.

It is common for straightedge participants, especially those who used drugs in the past, to write about personal relations with drug users in the forum:

> XdndgrrlX: Drug users . . . I used to be one therefore ninety percent of my friends are. And my friends happen to be some of the smartest, nicest, most accepting people I've ever met. I try not to judge people automatically because their idea of going out and having a good time is different then mine. Given, many of them have way too many brain cells missing to be worth my time.

> Nebula: I know [a lot of] intelligent drug users. Most of my friends are drug users, and I have never dated a sXe'r. Being sXe doesn't make you anymore smarter, it just gives you a great clarity of mind, a good sense of self-worth and individualism, and a healthy life.

At first glance, these posts seem to contradict the idea that participants establish a subcultural boundary that positions all drug users as outsiders. However, even they exemplify a similar set of negative stereotypes. XdndgrrlX points out that most of her friends are drug users and therefore seems at first to reject other posters' methods of judging people based on their leisure activities. Ironically, her next sentence stereotypes drug users as unintelligent and not worth interacting with. In both of the posts above, participants distinguish between drug users who are friends and drug users as a monolithic out-group. Nebula counters attributes of drug users as "stupid" by claiming to know many "intelligent drug users." Yet he still constructs drug users in opposition to a cleaner and clearer lifestyle, an idea regularly articulated in the forum.

One way that straightedge participants make social comparisons is by defining themselves as unique individuals while defining drug users as an undifferentiated and monolithic category. In posts and interviews, participants write about being surrounded by drug use and sexual promiscuity (at school, on television, in films, and on the internet). The straightedge forum provides a place where they can converse with others who share similar reservations about engaging in such behaviors. Those unable to participate in face-to-face straightedge networks also benefit from opportunities to interact with anonymous outsiders, thus facilitating the symbolic construction of a straightedge identity.

Norm Violations and Insider/Outsider Distinctions

Having focused on how participants erect boundaries between themselves and idealized or vilified others, we now look at how participants react to a norm violation by a well-known forum participant who embraced a straightedge identity. Straightedge participants who admit to violating subcultural norms inevitably suffer the discursive consequences. Perhaps most important for our discussion, however, is how nonstraightedgers achieve insider status in such interactions. In a thread titled "take the X's from my name," xXxNoTaToYxXx narrates a recent experience:

> I made the decision not to be sXe anymore. I still need to get some stuff out of my system. But I still will post once in a while because I have so much respect for the sXe community. So please take the X's from my name. Peace, be yourself at all costs.

Because participants' identities are largely restricted to text, xXxNoTaToYxXx's request to have the Xs removed from her username symbolizes a discursive role exit. She is asking other participants to affirm her role exit and thus to reidentify her as no longer straightedge. In this moment, her "cyberself" (Waskul 2003) undergoes a fundamental change as she crosses a subcultural boundary from insider to outsider.

Another participant, Shadow, asks, "Do you care to explain why you've decided not to be sXe anymore? Is it like with [another participant], where he just doesn't want the label?" In response, she writes:

> A few weeks ago I took a sleeping pill with an entire bottle of Tylenol cold and flu. It caused me to hallucinate, which I actually enjoyed. Granted, I won't do that again. But I have decided to drink once in a while. I need to get it out of my system. If I don't I will never truly be myself. I feel like me now. I have control over my life and I am not trying to live up to anyone's expectations but my own.

xXxNoTaToYxXx does not explain why she took a sleeping pill or cold medicine but writes, "Granted, I won't do that again," thereby acknowledging that her behaviors violate important norms. However, several of the forum's participants treat her next sentence with explicit disapproval and attack her. ThreeSix writes, "Have fun being fucked up, Toy. I feel bad for those around you who hoped you would be clean." Others write:

> Ethical Underground: So you're truly happy ruining your life? Killing yourself slowly gives you jollies or something? You have absolutely NO control over your life, and never will. To have control over your life is to not do those things. That's why they call it ADDICTION, sweetheart, because IT controls YOU.

> InnNerd: Can I get an Amen, Brother!! . . . I have no problem with people who don't want to claim "edge", but seriously, you've known a drug free life. How can you, hopefully a rational human being, knowingly do that to yourself? I have no personal beef with you, but substances are for people who cannot handle reality and have no imagination of their own.

Responses to xXxNoTaToYxXx's role exit highlight the heterogeneity of the forum's population in terms of how they interpret straightedge boundaries. Two participants

who self-identify as straightedge post sympathetic responses: "Sad, but whatever you wanna do, whatever makes you happy" (Punk Rock Bob); and "Do what's right for you" (xrostx). However, two of xXxNoTaToYxXx's strongest critics explicitly self-identify as nonstraightedgers. Ethical Underground had explained that he did not self-identify as straightedge because the term was too trendy for him. Similarly, ThreeSix claimed in the forum and later during an interview that he was "drug-free" but not straightedge. Yet these two participants, like others in other threads, actively construct straightedge boundaries that position them as insiders. They accomplish this by articulating subcultural values and beliefs in their posts, even while rejecting the straightedge label. Further, the actions of the two nonidentifying straightedgers are supported by self-identifying straightedgers in the forum.

The straightedge forum includes a sizable number of individuals who do not self-identify as straightedge. In one thread, a poster asked other participants, "Who on these forums [is] straightedge and who isn't?" Of the sixty-six participants who posted messages, fifty claimed to be straightedge, eleven self-identified as nonstraightedge, and five posted ambiguous statements. This means that approximately 17 percent of those who responded reject the straightedge label. We are aware of other participants who did not post responses in this thread but who also reject the straightedge label. Though extrapolating from this single statistic to all the forum participants is risky, the finding is significant inasmuch as it demonstrates that participants regularly extend online straightedge subcultural boundaries to include individuals who explicitly reject the straightedge label.

We have already suggested that the internet attracts people who may not belong to a straightedge scene in the face-to-face world but discover straightedge through the internet. Seven of nine interviewees explained that they had relied on the internet for information about the subculture when they first began self-identifying, and two reported that they first learned about straightedge through online interaction. One interviewee told us, " [My] main source of info [about straightedge] was the internet because no one else I know knows anything about it really, the specifics of it." Participants who learn about straightedge online are not socialized into the subculture in the same ways members of face-to-face groups are. Some subsequently report that the label is not nearly as important as being an active member of the online straightedge community (Williams 2004). The label is less important or unimportant because they have no friends in the face-to-face world who would understand its symbolic value.

This finding contrasts with Fine and Kleinman's (1979) thesis, which argues that self-identification is a necessary component of membership in a subcultural group. We agree that self-identification is certainly one way of defining subcultural boundaries, but our analysis of the straightedge forum shows that the site consists of individuals who do not self-identify as straightedgers but who play instrumental insider roles, actively defining and maintaining boundaries and facilitating the spread of straightedge culture. This may be due to the shifting patterns of distance and (dis)connection among participants of this online straightedge community. "Communities

are defined by their boundaries. And with every change in boundaries comes a new form of inclusion and exclusion, a new pattern of sharing and lack of sharing of experience" (Meyrowitz 1997:62). How straightedge forum participants articulate boundaries is tied dialectically to how they define their community, as well as how they identify with the subculture.

CONCLUSION

We have described how participants in a straightedge internet forum construct and express authentic subcultural identities and boundaries. The analysis supports an interactionist conception of subculture as arising through interpersonal communication and suggests the importance of further developing research on subcultures to include computer-mediated environments. Because Fine and Kleinman's (1979) work on the subculture concept preexists the widespread growth of the internet, it could not anticipate its influence on subcultural life. We suggest that internet forums should be conceptualized as one new example of a communication interlock that lies between immediate face-to-face situations and mass media. It is through these new media that participants establish, contest, negotiate, and transform subcultural identities and boundaries.

The straightedge forum is not a homogeneous phenomenon with rigid boundaries; rather it is a shifting terrain on which a heterogeneous population of youth interacts. The kinds of people one is likely to encounter and the ways in which participants express subcultural affiliation and identification are simultaneously similar to and different from face-to-face subcultural communities. The subculture is spread online by people sharing stories with others they likely will never meet face-to-face. These are often "self-stories, stories that might not otherwise be told" were it not for the liminal characteristics of the medium and the expansion of weak ties it promotes (Denzin 1998:97). Just as in face-to-face scenes, online subcultural insiders and outsiders also construct, negotiate, and defend boundaries (Lahickey 1998; Wood 2003). At the same time, new negotiations of boundaries occur as internet users interact in subcultural cyberspaces.

Our research explores how some youth use internet-based subcultural forums to combat the liminal feelings that are widespread in the face-to-face world. This partially explains the growth of marginalized groups in cyberspace. Many individuals who feel marginalized in contemporary society search for others in emerging virtual spaces. Yet while such an argument finds support in some of the cyberspace literature, an alternative conception of identity associates the ephemeral and anonymous aspects of online identity with a rejection of ascribed identification as it exists in the face-to-face world. The anonymous and liminal qualities of the internet allow individuals more freedom to avoid labels that they do not wish to carry. This may help to explain why individuals frequently move between internet groups, searching for others who share similar interests but often refusing to invest in and commit to a shared identity (Gerlander and Takala 1997). Such shared identities are "no longer central in the shaping of the consciousness. Instead, people belong unconditionally

to many different groups, each serving a purpose and fulfilling a specific need in that individual's life" (Ward 1999:103).

From this perspective, the internet, as a communication interlock, facilitates subcultural diffusion via nomadic internet users who may share subcultural values and feel a part of a virtual community but who do not feel the need to self-identify as subcultural members. In this respect, our findings corroborate a more general understanding of the postmodern condition, which has been characterized by the fragmentation of identity and the weakening of commitment to anything but oneself. This fragmentation might also be encouraged by the liminal quality of the medium itself. The internet is a "virtual" world where nothing seems quite real or compelling. As a liminal space that is "everywhere and nowhere, a place where nothing is forgotten and yet everything changes" (Benedikt 1992:2), the internet stands "betwixt and between . . . [its] ambiguous and indeterminate attributes . . . expressed by a rich variety of symbols" (Turner 1969:95). Internet users, including subcultural youth, use the internet's liminal qualities to simultaneously ground themselves in community and transgress cultural boundaries. Accordingly, the internet nurtures, and perhaps exacerbates, postmodern tendencies.

NOTES

1. In line with other published research (e.g., Atkinson 2003; Williams 2003; Wood 1999, 2003), we use the single word "straightedge" rather than two words, "straight edge," to refer to the subculture. For an in-depth social historical analysis of straightedge, see O'Hara 1999.
2. In addition to choosing a unique username, forum members may develop a user profile, though it is not required. Here, participants may enter their physical location, hobbies, and contact information (such as e-mail and IM addresses) and insert an image, or avatar, to represent them visually. This information is available to all forum participants.
3. Many straightedgers call the internalization of straightedge norms and beliefs "the Edge." Most participants agreed that the Edge is a personal phenomenon that is not exactly the same between two members.
4. The posts excerpted here have been edited for spelling and grammar. We were careful not to edit out subculturally relevant argot. For example, forum participants regularly use the acronym sXe as shorthand for "straightedge." It is comprised of the *S* and *E* from straight edge surrounding an X, which is a straightedge symbol. The X is also incorporated into many usernames.
5. The idea of being true to oneself above all is found in straightedge symbols as well, for example, both in interviews with Minor Threat's lyricist and in Minor Threat's cover art. The *Out of Step* album cover shows a flock of white sheep with a single black sheep running the opposite direction.

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