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## The Straightedge Subculture on the Internet: A Case Study

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by James Patrick Williams entitled "The Straightedge Subculture on the Internet: A Case Study." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Sociology.

, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Thomas C. Hood, Suzanne B. Kurth, Sherry Cable, Handel

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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We have read this dissertation  
and recommend its acceptance:

Handel K. Wright

Sherry Cable

Suzanne Kurth

Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew  
Vice Provost and Dean of  
Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**THE STRAIGHTEDGE SUBCULTURE ON THE INTERNET:  
A CASE STUDY**

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

J. Patrick Williams  
August 2003

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## Abstract

This dissertation is a case study analysis of the straightedge youth subculture on an Internet bulletin board system (forum), located on the worldwide web between September 2001 and May 2003. Ethnographic methods, including participant observation, e-focus groups, in-depth interviews, and qualitative content analysis are used to collect relevant data. Concepts from subcultural theory, identity and social identity/categorization theory are used throughout my analysis of the Straight Edge Discussion Forum to highlight cultural and social-psychological aspects of subculturally-based behavior and identity. Substantive chapters are divided as follows. First, the types of subcultural information available to subculture members and visitors of the straightedge website under investigation are described. Second, data are presented to demonstrate how three subcultural processes – style displays, affiliation, and boundary maintenance – occur through textual interaction in the forum. Third, I demonstrate that straightedge subculture is not comprised of a homogenous group, but rather of different member types. These member types are based on whether one uses the Internet to supplement participation in face-to-face straightedge culture versus reliance on the Internet as the sole means of subcultural participation. Fourth, subcultural norms are shown to be negotiated and contested through textual interaction between forum participants. The analysis informs sociological knowledge in three areas. It provides more detailed knowledge of straightedge by deconstructing the taken-for-granted meanings attached to subcultural norms. It suggests that the Internet serves as both medium and resource for subculturalists. Lastly, it shows how identity theory and social identity/categorization theories can be used in tandem to better illuminate subcultural identity processes.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

In *Delinquent Boys* (1955), Albert Cohen introduces his conceptualization of subculture, wherein individuals with similar problems who interact with one another may over time develop solutions to collectively experienced social problems through the construction of an alternative frame of reference. The frame of reference, conceptualized at both the social psychological and cultural levels of analysis, provides individual with a subcultural identity.

The process of finding other people who will accept one's new identity, however, is not a simple one in present-day societies. First, larger social and geographic conditions must be right for individuals to locate and interact with each other. Various social theorists have argued that proper conditions are becoming rarer, characterizing contemporary societies by a dearth of place-based communities (Putnam 2000). Second, who associates with whom also depends on how individuals "shop around" to find "kindred souls" (Cohen [1955] 1997:53). Cohen's words, written nearly half a century ago, were prophetic about using consumer terminology to express how identity is constructed in contemporary life (Lury 1996). Cohen describes the problems associated with finding like-minded others, especially those who share marginalized social roles:

...circumstances 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] 1997:53).

New communication technologies (NCTs) like the Internet offer one means to overcome such barriers. The Internet is powerful in its potential to reshape the social landscape, specifically in how it facilitates the relegation of geographic and parental-control barriers to virtually nothing. Thus youth, who are among the most avid Internet users (Cyberatlas 2002), are the most likely to utilize the Internet (when available) to establish new or enhance existing peer relations. Youth are constantly expanding their social worlds through contact with non-face-to-face others: through instant messaging, online gaming, bulletin board systems, and Internet relay chats, just to name a few (Thurlow and McKay 2003). Allucquere Rosanne Stone (1991) calls these emerging 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” (p. 111). Implicit in both Cohen and Stone is the idea that certain segments of the population have problems finding and/or keeping meaningful social relationships, thus driving them to seek various different means of getting together.

The search for meaningful relationships extends beyond the concept of community. Just as social life is viewed more often as fractured, fragmented and isolative in the postmodern literature, subcultures are visible and variable as collective reactions to what Moore (1998) terms a “crisis of meaningfulness” (p. 253). For many people, finding something meaningful in their lives is becoming increasingly difficult. As Larry Grossberg (1992) puts it, “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” (p. 222). Subcultural participation may be one outcome of the search for meaning, including meaningful relationships. Yet for youth in particular, subcultural participation often yields negative characterizations, even stigmatization. Subcultural youth may be seen as contentious, rebellious, uninformed, uncaring, and are generally constructed as the cultural Other, set apart from both children and adults in terms of values, beliefs, and ethics (Epstein 1998; Giroux 1994a, 1994b; Moore 1998, 2000). Subcultural youth are often represented in the media in ways that highlight the fractured and liminal aspects of their lives (Arnett 2000; Gaines 1991).

The punk subculture reflects this image of fragmentation (Hebdige 1979). Punk as a global phenomenon is represented as a deviant, music-based subculture founded upon the generalized rejection of mainstream social norms. Punks are often described in popular media as rebellious, apathetic, and even dangerous (Krokovay 1985; Lamy and Levin 1986). Studies of punk subculture focus on youths’ deviance (e.g., violence, drug abuse) more often than the positive attributes of subcultural participation; punk is often viewed as a problem rather than as a manifestation of the marginality of youth identity in Western society (Warren and Aumair 1998). Punk is mythologized to some extent in a monolithic form. This representation marginalizes both the lived experiences of youth and the larger cultural and structural phenomena that allow for, and perhaps promote, the proliferation of the punk subculture.

Views about the apathetic and indulgent characteristics of punk are not misplaced, as these characteristics are an accepted part of this alternative subculture. Yet, a growing number of youth reject the nihilism associated with

punk and participate in a new subculture: straightedge. In the early 1980s, straightedge arose from within the punk/hardcore music subculture in Washington DC. Straightedge signified a reaction to the larger youth culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which some youth saw as revolving around disruptive and dangerous leisure time activities such as drug use and promiscuity (Lahickey 1998). The rejection of these activities is apparent in three “rules” generally agreed upon by straightedgers: do not drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes; do not use illegal drugs; do not engage in promiscuous sexual activity. Like its punk/hardcore “parent culture,” straightedge formed as a music subculture and grew during the 1980s and 1990s via the distribution of straightedge music recordings and face-to-face (f2f) <sup>1</sup> interaction facilitated through music concerts, or gigs, in local communities. Since its emergence 20 years ago, straightedge subculture changed in several ways, including (in different geographic areas and to different degrees) the adoption of animal rights activism, vegetarianism and/or veganism, a broadened anti-drug stance, and militant codes of action (Wood 1999). Despite these various conjunctural forms, research on straightedge suggests that music and f2f interaction define the affective boundaries of the subculture (Allan and Kidder 2000; Christensen 1999; Haenfler 2002; Pileggi 1998; Tyler 1997; Wood 1999).

The straightedge subculture was originally an American music-based phenomenon, but is now represented in scenes throughout North America, Europe, and Austral-Asia. Straightedge subculture also has a presence on the Internet. While all previous research argues that punk/hardcore music is a defining

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<sup>1</sup> In line with the literature on NCTs, I will rely on several acronyms throughout this paper. They are compiled in Appendix 4 for the reader’s benefit.

characteristic of straightedge, some participants of Internet-based straightedge forums resist or reject affiliation with the punk/hardcore music scenes. Initial observations of interaction online led me to consider the following. It seems that the Internet is at least partially responsible for a shift that is occurring within straightedge subculture from being purely a music-based phenomenon to one in which part of its constituency rejects this founding characteristic. Also, many online straightedgers report not engaging in f2f interaction with other straightedgers because of their geographic isolation. Instead these youth utilize the Internet as a “subcultural program” (Gans 1999: 175), a selective means of becoming involved in the straightedge subculture.

Analysis of the straightedge subculture online offers the opportunity to study the role that the Internet plays in facilitating the search for meaningful identities in a subculture and a sense of community as well as the role the Internet may play in changing the internal dynamics of subcultures. This dissertation focuses on a specific website that caters to participants of the straightedge subculture. My goal is to bring together two divergent fields of research, subculture and cyberspace studies, and show their growing relevance to each other. This objective is accomplished by demonstrating how the Internet facilitates subcultural life by exploring a single straightedge forum on the Internet. I analyze how cyberspace is organized around subcultural norms and beliefs, how its participants construct subcultural identities through computer-mediated interaction, and how research on the Internet highlights the heterogeneity of subcultural phenomena. Some questions that guide this research are: How is an Internet site constructed in terms of the straightedge subculture?; How is the straightedge subculture communicated on an

Internet forum among participants?; and What can be learned about straightedge by studying an Internet forum about it? In short, the goal of this dissertation is to highlight the means by which straightedge subculture is experienced and performed online.

### The straightedge subculture

Straightedge is a subcultural schism (Wood 2000) of the punk/hardcore music subculture and emerged in the early 1980s on both the east and west coasts of the United States. The term straightedge comes from a 1981 song entitled *Straight edge* by the Washington D.C. band Minor Threat (Minor Threat 1981a), which states:

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 though 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 that can be linked to the subculture that subsequently emerged. Songwriter/vocalist Ian McKaye and the other members of Minor Threat labeled identified themselves not as straightedgers, but as punk rockers who were unhappy with the leisure activities of punks as well the larger youth culture (Lahickey 1998). Other punk/hardcore bands in the early 1980s also commented on their dissatisfaction with the go-nowhere attitude that predominated the American punk scene during that time (Mattson 2001; Moore 2000). Nevada's Seven Seconds, Boston's SS Decontrol and DYS, California's Uniform Choice and others combined the speed and energy of punk/hardcore music with positive lyrics to spread an upbeat and activist voice within the punk/hardcore subculture.



Minor Threat's singer was also instrumental in defining the early parameters of the subculture. While the song *Straight edge* gave the subculture a name, a song off the Minor Threat's second 7" EP provided a rudimentary ideology. In *Out of step* (Minor Threat 1981b), McKaye wrote:

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.

These three statements became the founding rules for the straightedge subculture and were based on "a deep hatred for the lifestyle" of the larger youth culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s (MacKaye in Small and Stuart 1982). Since then these rules have been broadened into a complex subcultural discourse that varies among straightedge scenes as well as within them.

The primary vehicle for transmitting the straightedge subculture has been grounded in music (Christensen 1999; Wood 1999). The straightedge subculture, like punk/hardcore more generally, closed the gap between performer and audience through lyrics that spoke directly to the experiences of many youth. Songs about the tribulations faced by fellow teenagers provided impetus for individuals to resist negative peer pressure by offering both an alternative frame of reference and a community of supporters. That most straightedge bands were comprised of teenagers also helped make the subculture seem more authentic and real for youth who were dissatisfied with what youth culture seemed to tolerate and/or promote.

Using music lyrics to represent subcultural frames of reference, a number of different iterations of the straightedge subculture were previously mapped (Wood 1999). Within a decade of its genesis, various straightedge scenes and individual straightedgers adopted radically different perspectives on the subculture. Some

incorporated a militant or hardline stance toward the mainstream and saw themselves as soldiers engaged in a war. Other subcultural ideals and behaviors included 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). Straightedge bands used music to relay personal stories to fans and to criticize mainstream culture, thereby constructing boundaries between straightedger and Other and creating an identity that could be claimed.

#### My value-laden decision to study straightedge

I have a historical connection with this subculture inasmuch as I self-identified as a straightedger during the latter half of the 1980s. Like the straightedgers I knew before beginning this research, I came to know straightedge through the punk/hardcore music scene. Punk/hardcore bands came every summer either to Chattanooga where I lived or to Atlanta, GA, which was only two hours away. In the summer of 1985 a friend from South Carolina introduced me to Seven Seconds' music, one of the earliest positive youth, proto-straightedge bands. I fell in love with Seven Seconds' melodic style of punk and ordered everything I could from my local record store. Reading the liner notes from the cassettes or LPs, I found lists of other punk, hardcore and straightedge bands in the band members' thanks lists. My knowledge of the straightedge subculture grew as I collected more music and met other people through skateboarding or at local punk gigs. Straightedge was important for me because so many of the other youth I knew were regular drug users by the age of 15. Watching my friends develop drug habits only pushed me to

identify with straightedge. I was the only straightedger I knew in town. I self-identified as a participant of a subculture that was abstract and disembodied beyond myself. It existed only in the music and the norms and beliefs that the lyrics taught me, and the occasional out-of-town concert where I would meet other straightedgers during an evening of music. By the time I was in college, I still did not have a relationship with anyone else who was straightedge. I still rejected the idea of using cigarettes, alcohol and other types of drugs, but the word straightedge began to lose importance to me as I became more self-confident in my own lifestyle decisions. It was also during my undergraduate career that I started playing drums in a band. Musically, we quickly crossed over into metal music as we became bored with the simplicity of punk's three chord politics. As I developed more technical playing skills and moved further away from punk music and lifestyle, the straightedge identity receded in my mind as a part of who I was. I was still drug free, but I would not have spontaneously said that I was straightedge.

Three concurrent events in 2001 drew me to reconsider the meaning of straightedge and ultimately to choose it as a dissertation topic. First, a course in mediated interaction stimulated my interest in the extent to which NCTs like the Internet allow for individuals to transcend geography and to experience social life online. Second, my work in the Cultural Studies department and discussions about popular culture with Dr. Thomas C. Hood rekindled my personal interests in culture – both provided me with an introduction to subculture literatures that I had not previously known existed. Third, my interest in contemporary straightedge subculture was sparked by having a self-identifying straightedge student in one of my classes. Talking with her outside of class caused me to look up straightedge on

the Internet. The number of straightedge-related websites surprised me, as I was not aware of the extent to which it had grown. Having not been involved with the subculture for more than a decade, I became intrigued by this growth and decided it was intrinsically worthy of further scrutiny.

Two additional reasons support my decision to study straightedge on the Internet. First, the straightedge subculture has become more recognized in recent years as seen by the rise in newspaper and magazine articles, Internet sites, and scholarly attention on the subculture. A Lexis Nexus search of national newspaper sources about straightedge from 1980 to 2001 revealed that the number of news items rose from only four items during the subculture's first decade (1982-1991) to seventy items during the its second decade (1992-2001). In addition, a small scholarly literature on the straightedge subculture exists, but this literature focuses on its f2f aspects and theorizes localized music scenes as a defining boundary. Most of this research remains unpublished. My dissertation moves beyond previous analyses of straightedge and considers how the subculture exists on the Internet.

#### Statement of the research problem and summary

According to Michael Brake (1985), subcultural theorizing and research has focused on the norms and values that define a subculture, societal reaction to subcultural participants, subcultural participants' social roles and positions, and the social organization of subcultures. At the micro level such research has regularly focused on f2f interaction among subcultural participants or on the internal organization of subcultural groups. At the macro level emphasis is placed either on specific subcultures' relationships vis-à-vis larger social processes and institutions

such as family, media, education and work, mainstream or “dominant” culture, or more generally to highlight certain aspects of the relationship between culture and society. There is to date only a few studies on how subculturalists use the Internet, nor how subcultures or subcultural identities are constructed through computer-mediated interaction. Rather, much current research on the Internet social life is conceptualized as a sociology of community (e.g., Etzioni and Etzioni 1997, 1999) rather than as a sociology of subculture.

The term subculture is utilized as a conceptual tool for analyzing an online forum dedicated to the straightedge subculture. Subculture and community are very similar terms to the degree that they are sometimes used interchangeably (Thornton 1997a), yet distinctions exist. Subcultural studies tend to focus on aggregates that differ from what are generally considered communities. For example, subculture is often used in connection with youth versus adults (Brake 1985) or to contextualize peer groups that contrast the parental home or the mainstream. Subculture is thus used to conceptualize individuals that are separated, or separate themselves, from the mainstream. In this way, subculture is related to the concept of collective identity. Subculture highlights resistance as a key aspect of individual and social identities. The use of the subculture concept also places specific emphasis on the cultural aspects of social life. Because I am interested in the cultural aspects of a straightedge forum, subculture is a logical conceptual choice. Lastly and importantly, previous research has conceptualized straightedge as a subculture (Irwin 1999; Wood 1999, 2001).

This dissertation provides a descriptive analysis of an Internet straightedge forum. I look at how subcultural information is transmitted and negotiated among

participants in an Internet forum to demonstrate how the straightedge subculture is interactionally accomplished. My research project differs from other straightedge research that relies only on content analysis of subcultural artifacts such as musical lyrics or that represents the subculture in static terms (Irwin 1999; Wood 1999) by not only showing how subcultural participation online is achieved, but that the Internet is enabling the subculture to undergo crucial transformations over time and space.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of literature and concepts

#### Introduction

This chapter reviews literature pertinent to the study of straightedge subculture on the Internet. My primary conceptual tools come from the subculture literature. I therefore provide an overview of the relevant theoretical traditions during the twentieth century, starting with the Chicago School, moving into ecological and strain theories, then to British cultural studies, and finally to more contemporary social psychological research on cyberspace. A review of cyberspace literature that relates to the characteristics of online culture and identity is provided, and I then close by identifying some specific concepts that inform subsequent analysis.

#### Culture and subculture

Cultures and subcultures are obviously related to each other linguistically. The prefix “sub” refers to something that is under, beneath or within; something that is secondary, smaller than or contained as a part of some larger object or phenomenon. Subculture therefore linguistically refers to a smaller unit within culture. This distinction holds true for their sociological meanings as well. Both culture and subculture are abstract concepts with subculture being encapsulated within the larger concept of culture. Both culture and subculture are defined in relation to human action, either as structure shaping it or as consequences of it. These alternative definitions reveal a dialectic contained within them: culture is at the same time structuring and emergent. Culture and subculture are also understood hierarchically (Becker 1986:23; Williams 1976). Culture may be

synonymous with high culture, with subculture referring to popular or alternative forms of culture. Culture and subculture serve as analytic tools for sociological analysis. Sociologists use culture to describe or explain how people share understandings and act concertedly (Becker 1986). Shared understanding is the basis of culture. Individuals act based on their understanding of what is appropriate to do in a given situation, which is learned.

The subculture concept is instrumental in demonstrating the variety of cultural phenomena that exist among youth in contemporary society. Subcultures are salient constellations of norms and beliefs that are acknowledged and at some level agreed upon by interacting individuals; subcultures are manifested in social relations among individuals. Subcultures exist in relation to larger cultural and social phenomena and are understood in reference to them. Howard Becker emphasized this relation in his discussion of deviant subcultures: “the deviance of a group is not ‘natural,’ but the result of a specific kind of social construction: and one of the key mechanisms of this process is the power to define situations *for* others, and the power to label others – and make those labels stick” (Becker 1963:9). Subcultures are marked off from mainstream culture by norms and value-orientations.

This discussion leads to a brief consideration of the second conceptual level of the distinction between culture and subculture. In his historical analysis of the term culture, Raymond Williams (1976) notes that one of culture’s meanings is as a substitute or synonym for the term high culture. In this sense of the word, culture becomes associated with a dominant social class. High culture represents a normative set of tastes, values, attitudes and behaviors. Whether in table manners,



music and art appreciation, or dialect, there are cultured and ‘uncultured’ forms (which correspond to proper and improper, respectively). In contrast to high culture, low-, popular-, and sub-culture have historically represented the cultural aspects of subordinate social groups. Low culture or subcultures have consequently been defined as deviant vis-à-vis the naturalized forms of high culture (e.g., Beisel 1993). Herbert Gans (1999) argues that, while high culture is different than popular culture, neither is more valuable than the other. Rather, high-, low-, popular-, and sub-cultures represent various taste cultures, each of which “contains shared or common aesthetic values and standards” (p. 6; see also Mukerji and Schudson 1986).

Whether we speak of high culture, popular culture or subculture, culture is ‘naturalized’ through the process of hegemony. Hegemony allegedly is at work when subordinate strata consent to the norms, rules, laws and other normative structures of a dominant cultural stratum. Consent, rather than coercion, is hegemony’s hallmark. According to Antonio Gramsci, consent is achieved largely through the proliferation of “common sense,” which he contrasts with “good sense” (Gramsci 1971: 60). Common sense operates in the learned assumptions individuals make when they accept what is right, natural, or ‘the way things are.’ Common sense is a social construction that implies a privileged way of understanding the social world to the exclusion of other possible perspectives. Processes that are ‘natural’ appear beyond individual or group control. However hegemony is not so powerful a force that it exists uncontested on the cultural landscape. Good sense marks the processes of critical evaluation through which social inequalities become not only obvious but intolerable. Gramsci theorized

hegemony as a process-of-becoming rather than a structure-of-being and that it re-adjusts itself constantly against threats from subcultures. Hegemony tends to work because the relations between the powerful and subordinates benefit all those concerned. Lee Artz and Bren Murphy (2000) note:

Within a stable hegemony, how we live our lives and how we understand our lives generally correspond to the political and material conditions for that hegemony. ... Hegemony is thus forged in the very relationships that groups and individuals consent to and from. Cultural conditions for hegemony constitute a whole way of life. (P. 74)

Hegemony is not so ingrained and so taken-for-granted that members of subordinate strata are powerless to resist. Resistance to hegemony, the search for alternative moral or social orders, characterizes subcultures. Thus, subculturalists are those who use good sense, while those constrained by common sense are members of mainstream society.

The paradox of culture is what enables subcultures to flourish within the bounds of a dominant cultural apparatus.

[Subcultures] are not simply 'ideological' constructs. They, too, *win space* for the young: cultural space in the neighbourhood and institutions, real time for leisure and recreation, actual room on the street or street-corner. They develop specific rhythms of interchange, structured relations between members: younger to older, experienced to novice, stylish to square. They explore 'focal concerns' central to the inner life of the group: things always 'done' or 'never done', a set of social rituals which underpin their collective identity and define them as a 'group' instead of a mere collection of individuals. They adopt and adapt material objects - good and possessions - and reorganize them into distinctive 'styles' which express the collectivity of their being-as-a-group. These concerns, activities, relationships, materials become embodied in rituals of relationship and occasion and movement. Sometimes, the world is marked out, linguistically, by names or an *argot* which classifies the social world exterior to them in terms meaningful only within their group perspective, and maintains its boundaries. (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts 1976:45-46)

Like culture, subculture must be conceived as both limiting and enabling for its participants. Just as a subculture provides a site of resistance for its participants, so too does it constrain how they may resist.

Some sociologists suggest that the subculture concept is no longer adequate to express new forms of cultural life based on shared interests and values. Andy Bennett's (1999) call for the replacement of the subculture concept with the concept of neo-tribes is one example. He argues that subculture “has arguably become little more than a convenient ‘catch-all’ term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect” (p. 599). Neo-tribes, on the other hand, are “groupings which...are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterized by fluid boundaries and floating memberships” based on “the shifting nature of youth's musical and stylistic preferences and the essential fluidity of youth cultural groups” (pp. 600, 614).

Similarly, David Muggleton (2000) questions whether “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” (p. 48). Yet unlike Bennett, who attempts to restrict the meaning of subculture to class, Muggleton (2000, chap. 4) demonstrates how subculturalists themselves continue to articulate their own social identities and actions in comparison to a perceived mainstream culture. Modifying the subculture concept to study alternative forms of collective identity is fruitful if we take into account how individuals construct the meanings associated with sub- and mainstream cultures, for it is their understandings of these concepts that produce resistant discourse.

### Youth culture and youth subcultures

A brief comment on the distinction between youth culture and youth subculture is necessary before moving deeper into subcultural theory. Youth culture is a vague term that is constructed out of 'common sense' knowledge that youth are different than adults. Youth culture was introduced by Talcott Parsons (1942), who sought a nomothetic explanation for the structural differences between adults and adolescents. Parsons' argued that youth represented a homogeneous, unified and classless aggregate that possessed its own distinct culture. Other theorists such as James Coleman (1961) described youth as composed of "separate subcultures [which] exist right under the very noses of adults – with languages all their own, with special symbols and, most importantly with value systems...that lead away from those goals established by the larger society" (Coleman 1961:9). For Coleman, subcultures were synonymous with sub-societies and thus represented parts of a single unified youth culture.

Two key weaknesses in work on youth culture are apparent. First, the concept of a youth culture glosses over the many varieties of youth cultures that exist, thus oversimplifying a cultural sociology of youth. As Brake (1985) has commented, it is the youthful rather than the young that comprise so-called youth culture, rightly noting that youth cultures are not limited to adolescents. Second, Parsons' ahistorical approach to youth precludes either an analysis of the social factors that lead to the construction of particular groups of young people *as* youth, or an exploration of how youth interpret their own positions within larger social matrices. Decades of research on collective youth behavior reveal that youth by no means share a uniform culture (Brake 1985; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Muggleton

2000; Gelder and Thornton 1997). The concept of youth subculture works against the idea of a unified youth culture by focusing on specific constellations of values, beliefs, norms, styles, and argot that simultaneously ground youth in shared cultures and distinguish them from other youth.

### Subcultural theories

Subcultures allow for the positive assessment of the self through the enablement of sets of meaningful relationships based on shared norms and beliefs. Subcultures, like all cultures, allow individuals to be ‘somebody.’ Subcultures are comprised of individuals who may feel alienated from mainstream society or who are disgruntled with their position with the social system (Brake 1985). The psychological security of belonging to a subculture is achieved through successful socialization into the subculture, which is facilitated through interaction with subcultural peers and mentors and through incorporation of subcultural styles and argot. During socialization, individuals develop methods of social comparisons by which they liken themselves to significant others (the in-group) while distancing themselves from non-significant others, the out-group (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990). This is especially true in youth groups as members negotiate the liminal years of adolescence (Tarrant, North, Edridge, Kirk, Smith, and Turner 2001).

The distinction between subculture as a cultural phenomenon and the individuals who make up a subculture is addressed by Robert Wood (2000), who distinguishes subcultural “frames of reference” from subcultural “franchises.” A subcultural frame of reference is “a set of socially constructed definitions and group

standards that emerges primarily from the interactions between subculturally inclined individuals” (Wood 2000:27). It is a corpus of subcultural knowledge, values, and norms, that is empirically reachable through the study of subcultural communication, wherein these components are activated. To study subculture, the researcher must approach its embodied forms, which Wood calls subcultural franchises: “a concrete social network comprised of subculturally affiliated individuals who conduct their activities and interaction with distinct geographical or territorial boundaries” (Wood 2000:27).<sup>2</sup> Subcultures are therefore embodied in individuals who interact within franchises using a shared frame of reference. One problem with Wood’s conceptualization of the frame of reference is that it suggests a stable and relatively rigid corpus of knowledge, norms and beliefs that subcultural individuals draw upon for action. When he discusses the heterogeneity of subculture, he theorizes it as group schisms (Wood 2000) rather than the subjectivities that members bring to bear in everyday life. Subcultural franchises are also equated to groups, with obvious boundaries that separate them from other subcultural franchises. Splitting individuals into distinct categories oversimplifies interconnected and overlapping communication interlocks within subcultures. These distinctions risk reifying the subculture by shifting attention toward the frames of reference which come to characterize franchises and away from how individual members bring subculturally-relevant knowledge to bear in interaction (Fine and Kleinman 1979). Therefore when I refer to a subcultural frame of reference, I will differentiate between the cultural level (i.e., a norm) and Cohen’s

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term group similarly to Wood’s franchise. However, I de-restrict his definition to include groups that are not locally bounded, e.g. Internet groups.

(1955) original conceptualization of the term as “a glass [which] consists of the interests, preconceptions, stereotypes and values [individuals] bring to a situation” (Cohen [1955] 1997:45). Norms are conceptualized at the cultural level, while a frame of reference is conceptualized as a social psychological process through which individuals interpret and define their own actions.

Many researchers have attempted to use the subculture concept to analyze group cohesiveness as well as hierarchy, difference, and resistance. Sarah Thornton (1997a) notes that “‘subcultures’ (as they have been written about over the past three-quarters of a century) have come to designate social groups which are perceived to deviate from...normative ideals...” (p. 2). Implicit in this statement are concomitant focuses on deviance and collective behavior. Even as individuals deviate from mainstream culture, they usually do so in groups (Cohen 1955). Subcultures have been studied in many forms, including religious subcultures, criminal and delinquent subcultures (musical, ethnic, financial), and youth subcultures (typically focusing on street life and leisure activities), often with an interest in how social identities are formed and the consequences of membership for the individual.

I now turn to a review of the subcultures literature. To simplify the diversity within the literature, I divide the review as follows. I begin by reviewing the early ecological and strain iterations of subcultural theorizing that were dominant in the United States from the 1930s through the 1960s. I then turn to the more-Marxist analyses of ‘new subcultural theory’ that arose at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Britain the 1970s. Next I discuss an interactionist conceptualization of subculture, which provides the theoretical framework for this

research. Finally, I focus attention on recent research on the Internet that relates to subculture and close with a review of useful analytic tools for this research.

### *Ecological and strain theories of subculture*

Early sociological research in the US predominantly concentrated on the deviant aspects of subcultures and is typified by the Chicago School's work in urbanism, ethnic neighborhoods, and deviance (Brake 1985; Gelder and Thornton 1997). The Chicago School represented a tradition of American sociology that extended from the early twentieth century until the 1950s and relied upon a model of society in equilibrium and upon the belief that subcultures in the US arose as a result of urbanization. This argument can be traced to early essays such as Robert Park's *The City* ([1915] 1997), though his essay predates the coining of the term subculture. Park's essay is important because of its emphasis on collective lifestyles, the relevance of moral order and social control within groups, and the call for in-depth, qualitative, empirical analyses of how cultural life is experienced. Milton Gordon's ([1947] 1997) articulation of the subculture concept focused on improving analyses of aggregates that were earlier limited to demographic variables such as ethnicity or class. Early subcultural research often aimed at understanding how particular lower class ethnic folk organized social life given their economic conditions. So, while the subculture concept offered a new focus on the intersection of culture and the political economy of modern cities, that focus was limited to low-income and ethnic minorities.

Within the Chicago School an ecological model of the city developed. The city became analogous to an ecosystem, within which its various parts lived in



symbiosis. Social problems such as deviant behavior and delinquency challenged the ecological model of society in equilibrium, and the concept of sub-cultures became useful in explaining social pathologies (Brake 1985). Subcultures were recognized as “relatively distinct social subsystem[s] within a larger social system and culture” (Fischer 1975: 1323) with the terms subculture and subsystem being coterminous. Subcultural research emphasized ethnic enclaves, youth, criminals, and other peripheral cultural groups, but did not adequately distinguish normative structure from social organization (Brake 1985).

The ecological model was not the only iteration of subcultural theorizing in the US. Robert Merton (1938) also theorized deviant individuals/groups within a functionalist framework. Merton posited that disjunctions existed between the cultural goals of a society and the ability of its members to achieve those goals, which caused psychological strain for individuals. His theory of strain linked members of deviant individuals’ behaviors to dominant social structures through various potential types of action: innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. Merton claimed that the extent of anomie experienced and subsequent deviance engaged in by individuals depended on whether society provided the means for individuals to achieve mainstream cultural goals. Unconventional means to achieve mainstream cultural goals, as well the rejection of mainstream cultural goals and strategies, promoted the formation of subcultures, the members of which motivated and supported each other in performing deviant acts. Merton’s work was subsequently developed using the subculture concept.

Within strain theories, the emergence of subcultures was theorized to be a consequence of deviant behavior. Strain theory sought to explain how deviant

behaviors continued to occur within a mainstream system by claiming that subcultures created new sets of values and norms for participants to learn by inverting the norms and values of the dominant culture (Cohen 1955). The new normative subcultural framework brought psychological and emotional well-being to individuals. Cohen's version of strain emphasized frames of reference that subcultural participants adopted as they assumed deviant careers. Deviance was explained through a combination of choices made by individuals within their social spheres and the downward mobility of marginalized class to which they belonged. Subcultures emerged when "a number of actors with similar problems of social adjustment interact with one another and innovate new frames of reference" (Cohen 1955; cited in Thornton 1997b:13). This conceptualization of subculture highlighted social fragmentation within modern urban areas and the splintering of residents into ethnic and class-based aggregates. It further emphasized that both social structure and the social milieu of individuals combined to determine the problems that they experienced as well as the solutions that they selected. It was Cohen (1955) who offered the first systematic analysis of culture and subculture to explain collective deviance. He argued that interaction between like-minded individuals was a key generating force in a subcultural frame of reference.

Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin's (1960) work on subcultures also began with the assertion that disjunctions between mainstream culture and participants subordinate classes occur within society. They focused on the idea that the inability to succeed was not understood by individuals as their fault, but rather as the fault of the system. Such disjunctions caused individuals to lose faith in the legitimacy of the dominant social order and, when a critical mass of similarly disenfranchised

individuals was reached in a given geographical area, a subculture (or multiple subcultures) would emerge. Cloward and Ohlin's work differed from previous subcultural theorizing in how they conceptualized the individual's reaction to strain. Whereas Cohen (1955) argued that subcultural participants inverted mainstream cultural values, Cloward and Ohlin insisted that subcultural participants had the ability to create new alternative subcultural frames of reference. Thus, subcultures were not theorized as merely reactive. Rather, subcultures were created by individuals who separated themselves from the dominant social order as a symbolic rejection of its legitimacy.

Subcultural strain theories developed over several decades in the United States into an increasingly prevalent form of social analysis in the 1960s and 1970s, and were further conceptualized as counter- and contra-cultures (Yinger 1960; Roberts 1978). Yet, they suffered from several weaknesses. First, early ecological and strain theories were overly-deterministic; subcultures were understood primarily as reactive formations to mainstream or dominant culture. Second, strain theories tended to assume that the disjuncture between the desire and means for *economic* success explained why subcultures emerged. Third, analyses were limited to poor and/or minority segments of large cities. Theorizing subculture slowed the 1970s in the United States, just as a radically different approach to subcultures was establishing itself in Britain.

#### *"New subcultural theory"*

During the 1970s, cultural studies in Britain focused largely on youth and youth subcultures, and much of the work at the Center for Contemporary Cultural

Studies<sup>3</sup> made youth explicit in its formulation. This work, often referred to as ‘new subcultural theory’ (Brake 1985; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995), analyzed a variety of British youth subcultures from the 1950s through the 1970s, from the allegedly style-driven Teddy boy, Mod, Rocker, Hippie and Punk subcultures to the less obvious subcultures grounded in academic and leisure activities. Subculture and class were inseparable as early British cultural studies placed subcultures structurally within a class-determining system. Unlike the consensus-based models found in sociology, cultural studies removed the functional component (in the economic sense) of subculture. Rather than view subcultures as economic adaptations to systemic or structural conditions, cultural studies work demonstrated how subcultures provide symbolic solutions that arose at specific historical moments (Clarke et al. 1976; Hebdige 1979).

According to new subcultural theory, subcultures arose as a reaction to, and at the same time reflected aspects of, both the “parent” and dominant cultures that surrounded them (Clarke et al. 1976). Subcultural youth struggled to differentiate themselves both from the parent culture (i.e., working-class culture) and dominant culture (i.e., bourgeoisie culture). Yet, the differences (the resistance) were constrained by the very fact that the subcultures invariably arose from within specific cultural configurations and social relationships that limited the possibilities for alternative ideologies. So despite stylistic differences for example, subcultural youth remained similar to their parents and peers in regards to their relation to the

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<sup>3</sup> The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s represents perhaps the most dominant form of cultural studies. Work at the CCCS was instrumental in legitimizing the study of youth subculture (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976 for an early, exemplary collection of such work).

dominant culture and stood to experience the same treatment from mainstream society as those closest to them.

Coming from a Marxist perspective, CCCS work theorized dominant culture as a hegemonic construction of the class that owned the means of production, while “parent” cultures were theorized as being local, working-class, and neighborhood-based. This emphasis distinguished CCCS work from most earlier (particularly American) work inasmuch as subcultures were not defined in terms of strain. Instead, they were understood as sites of resistance to cultural hegemony. Subcultural youth formed sites of resistance on the street corners, in the dance halls, on the open road and in the weekend holiday spots. But while these sites offered space and time for youth to ‘do their own thing,’ their subcultures failed to offer them anything more. At the end of the weekend, lower- and working-class youth had only their dead-end jobs to go back to.

New subcultural theorists were quick to concede some problems with studying youth subcultures that American theorists had not. First, they pointed out that most youth never entered into subcultures, so there was little if any generalizability to youth culture available from subcultural analysis. Subcultures were theorized as unique, conjunctural formations that could not be understood in positivist terms. Youth subcultures were studied for what they could tell scholars about cultural life in a given place and time. As for the focus on the leisure activities of youth, the CCCS recognized that even subcultural youth were often more interested in passing the time than they are in anything else. Resistance was not first-and-foremost on participants’ minds. Rather, subcultural affiliations represented to participants the antithesis of work and school, both of which were commonly despised.

The resistance that subcultural youth did engage in was perhaps most obvious in their dress. Subcultural style (Clarke 1976b; Hebdige 1979) was seen as a symbolic resource for youth inasmuch as the dominant culture dismissed, marginalized or rejected the appropriateness of it.<sup>4</sup> Sartorial analyses were typically grounded in a semiotic approach through which meanings were understood not as inherent within objects or practices but as negotiable and polysemic. The semiotician's job was to deconstruct the taken-for-granted meanings that were attributed to social objects and practices. This deconstruction required that the semiotician interrogate how taken-for-granted meanings were created and distributed as well as by whom. New subcultural theory took a Gramscian approach to the everyday life of subcultural participants by arguing that taken-for-granted meanings arose through hegemony, but were apt to be appropriated by subcultures and inverted.

Through stylistic rejection of the dominant culture, coupled with negotiated subcultural agreement on their use, subcultural objects and practices became imbued with new meanings. This appropriation was called bricolage following the work of Claude Levi-Strauss (Clarke 1976b; Hebdige 1979; Levi-Strauss 1966). Bricolage occurred at a superficial level, for just as fashion was used to mark subcultural difference, it was in turn commodified and re-packaged for subcultural consumption. Through "rituals of consumption...the subculture at once reveals its 'secret' identity and communicates its forbidden meanings. It is basically how commodities are used in subculture which marks the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations" (Hebdige 1979:103). Subcultural youth removed

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<sup>4</sup> American sociologists have also considered the cultural and sociological meanings of style. See for example Fred Davis (1992).

themselves ideologically from dominant culture, but this removal did nothing for them economically. It was merely a “magical” solution to broader social limitations that faced post-war working class British youth (Clarke 1976a).

Class, especially in the British context, was a cornerstone of subcultural analysis in the 1970s. Like its American predecessors, new subcultural theories acknowledged that structural relations which perpetuated social inequality were primary social forces behind the rise of subcultures. As a result, individuals engaged in subcultural activities that symbolized their resistance to structural conditions against which they were, in an economic sense, relatively powerless. Like the earlier American subcultural theories, cultural studies was criticized in how they theorized youth subcultures (see Burke and Sunley 1998; Clarke 1997; Gelder and Thornton 1997; McRobbie and Garber 1976; Muggleton 2000; and Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995 for critiques). Like much preceding American research, new subcultural theorists focused primarily (if not exclusively) on lower-class culture, as well as limiting their analyses primarily to males and whites. Their focus on class limited researchers’ ability to make sense of how different subcultures from within the same parent culture used completely different sets of symbols to resist dominant culture. CCCS theorists were also charged with being overtheoretical and failing to rely on adequate empirical data. Finally, subcultures were theorized as static and homogeneous entities that were compared to a dominant cultural regime. Analyses of Teds, Skinheads, and Punks ignored the variability present within each subculture, primarily because they were theoretically instead of empirically driven and tended to ignore what subcultural

participants were actually doing, focusing instead on ‘reading’ resistance through style and ritual.

### Interaction and identity in subcultural theorizing

Around the same time as ‘new subcultural theory’ in Britain offered a reconceptualization of the subculture concept, a pair of American symbolic interactionists pressed their own critiques of traditional American subcultural research, though the primary critique (Fine and Kleinman 1979) did not review “new subcultural theory.” The new interactionist work focused on broadening the applicability of the subculture concept in empirical research, so that it was no longer limited to studies of deviance. The concept of strain developed from the 1940s until the 1960s by sociologists who focused significant attention on both the subcultural and interactional aspects of deviant behavior (Becker 1963; Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960). Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman's (1979) article provided a detailed deconstruction of American subcultural theories as they addressed interactionist concerns that subculture had become a reified concept that offered little theoretical utility outside criminology.

Four important points underlay their critique. First, they argued that traditional American sociology failed to adequately differentiate subculture as a concept from the individuals that comprised it. Fine and Kleinman (1979) noted that subculture was often used to describe people who comprise a social network or a population segment (e.g., a subsociety) rather than as a cultural phenomenon made up of symbols, practices and material. Second, they argued that existing theorizing did not successfully delineate subcultures from demographic populations and thus



failed to define subcultural boundaries that separated a subcultural population from larger populations. Third, they emphasized the importance of interaction in the generation and activation of (sub)cultural elements by arguing that past theories tended to treat subculture as a homogenous and static system. Last, they called for a reevaluation of how researchers theorized values, norms and beliefs. Prior researchers (e.g. Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Sutherland 1947) were charged with limiting analyses to value orientations, attitudes or stereotypic behaviors, which in turn could result in the view that a corpus of subcultural knowledge exists external to subcultural participants, thereby reifying the concept.

Their conceptualization of subculture worked to transcend these limits. It shifted attention onto how subcultural elements were generated and activated through interpersonal communication. This shift was achieved through the concept of communication interlocks, which represent conduits within and between groups whereby cultural information is transmitted. Fine and Kleinman theorized several types of communication interlocks: multiple group membership, weak ties, structural roles and media diffusion. All individuals belong to multiple social groups that may or may not overlap in membership. These multiple memberships involve social ties with many other people, some weaker than others. Correspondingly, participants in a subculture generally also interact within other cultural spheres. Their overlapping social ties facilitate the flow of information across a subcultural boundary. Cultural information can also be spread by individuals who inhabit key structural roles within a subculture. Music bands are an example of groups through which subculturally-relevant information is spread between subcultural groups and potentially to non-members. Lastly, information

can be transmitted back and forth across a subcultural boundary via mass media. Information about a subculture reported through the print media or television, for example, may encourage individuals to either contact or avoid perceived subcultural participants.

As Fine and Kleinman (1979) note, “through these communication interlocks, cultural information and behavior options are diffused, resulting in the construction of a common universe of discourse throughout the social network in which they are spread. This social network serves as the *referent* of the subculture” (p. 8). They defined subcultures as composed of individuals who interact. Following from Mead (1934:89), subculture is conceived of as a “universe of discourse” (Fine 1983:181) within which the discursive practices of individuals refer to the subculture itself. Communication interlocks are conceptualized as the means through which subculture is diffused beyond a single group culture to individuals in geographically diverse areas. Together, the communication types help analyze how information about the subculture is diffused outside a single group as well as how new values and norms are transmitted into subcultural spaces and facilitate subcultural change.

Doreen Massey (1998) contributed to an interactionist focus on weak ties and boundary transcendence when she described the fluidity of subcultures that enables them to transcend local constraints: “the evidence seems to be that all youth cultures...are hybrid cultures. All of them involve active importation, adoption and adaptation” (p. 122-3), and thus should be limited by stereotypical characteristics. Instead, one must study how individuals make sense of a subculture in everyday life and how they express that understanding. Massey also highlights the problem of describing subcultures apart from the larger social milieu in which they exist. If

subcultures import and export, adopt or adapt information across subcultural boundaries, then it is necessary to study the media through which transmission occurs.

My approach to subculture also requires an emphasis on how subcultural identities are constructed. Interactionists seek to understand how individuals identify themselves in relation to others. In an Internet forum, an individual constructs a self through meaningful interaction with others in situations which are bounded by the shared cultural understandings of participants. Identification as a participant of a subculture becomes salient through interaction. Norms, values, and beliefs are constructed through interaction and come to frame how an individual relates to the subculture, to other subcultural participants, and to outsiders (Mead 1934). Identification is crucial for understanding the boundaries of a subculture as constructed by participants, although Fine and Kleinman (1979) did not develop a detailed discussion of identity.

Social identity/social categorization theorists and identity theorists from within the symbolic interactionist tradition have recently drawn upon each others work to produce more robust theorizations of identity and identification (Hoggs and Ridgeway 2003; Thoits and Virshup 1997). Both traditions provide complementary understandings of the self concept (Jenkins 1996; Stets and Burke 2000) and share a conception of the self as reflexive and as mediating the relationship between the individual and society. Yet, each goes about analyzing different aspects of this relationship. These two traditions of theorizing need to be brought together to more fully illuminate identity processes and structures (Hogg and Ridgeway 2003).

Identity theory (IT), as developed in the symbolic interactionist tradition (Stryker 1980), utilizes the concept of roles to conceptually link individuals with social structures. Role can be defined narrowly as “the obligations and expectations that apply to our behavior when occupying a particular social status in a particular situation” (Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2003: 147), or more loosely as the general expectations and norms attached to self-identifications (Stryker and Statham 1995). Using the looser definition, roles are understood in part by norms, which are part of social structure. As Stryker notes, “the significant property of social structures is that they define boundaries” (Stryker 1997: 318). 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). Role-based IT focuses on the dynamic aspects of identity: how people come to identify themselves with a role, and how that role affects their self-identification(s). In situations that lie within a subcultural sphere, subcultural as well as situational norms make salient specific roles and identities. For the purpose of this research, emphasis is placed on subcultural norms and how they are internalized by participants. The concept of individual identity therefore refers to self-conceptions as normative structures.

Social identity/social categorization theories (SIT/SCT), on the other hand, have psychological roots (e.g., Tajfel 1982; Turner and Giles 1981) and use the concept of categories to explain how individuals affiliate with and differentiate themselves from others through in-group and out-groups. According to SIT/SCT, people tend to attribute characteristics to others based on socially learned categories. These categories may refer to socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, race),

organization/group membership (sociologist, motorcycle club member), or social roles (wife, student). People “lump” and “split” themselves and others into aligned and opposed categories (Zerubavel 1996), i.e., in-groups and out-groups. Such categorizations are cognitive processes that guide social behavior.

IT focuses broadly on individuals’ differences (contrasting roles with counter-roles), while SIT/SCT focuses on their similarities (similarities among people who share a categorical affiliation). Both theories conceive of identity as a process of classifying the self and others: social identity theorists call this process “self-categorization,” while identity theorists use the terms “self-identification” or “identification.” In both cases, part of what is being described is the process of affiliation – how individuals view themselves versus others, either as individuals occupying roles, or as members of groups. In SCT, social identity is defined as “self-categories that define the individual in terms of his or her shared similarities with member of certain social categories in contrast to other social categories” (Turner et al 1994:454). Thus, like role-identity theory, SCT emphasizes in-group behavior by focusing on “shared norms and social influence processes” (Thoits and Virshup 1997:117). Claims to categorical identity are evaluative in nature and subsequently affect self-esteem, provide a coherent sense of self, and give meaning to one’s actions (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990).

Interactionists argue that self-identification, through which individuals “can view themselves as members of a group, as marginal to a group, or as outsiders” (Fine and Kleinman 1979: 12), can be measured along two axes: salience and centrality. Centrality refers to a member’s commitment to a category- or role-based identity, while salience refers to the frequency with which an individual activates

that identity. Stets and Burke (2000) go further, claiming that, “the stronger the commitment [of a person to a category or role], the greater the salience” (p. 230). Salience and centrality are thus interrelated aspects of the subcultural identity concept because they treat identity as lying along a continuum rather than as present or absent. Commitment represents the continuum by referring to the relative strength with which an individual identifies as a subcultural participant or with a subcultural role. One important aspect of commitment is whether the individual has the opportunity to interact with others who will ratify the identity and from whom s/he can get subcultural information (Fine and Kleinman 1979: 14).

Thus far, I have reviewed the major theoretical developments in the study of subcultures, first by focusing on the Chicago School, shifting to mid-century structural strain models, then to Birmingham’s new subcultural theory with its focus on resistance and leisure, and finally to a social psychological conception of subcultures. There is still the issue of the substantive features of subcultures today, particularly in how they exist in cyberspace. I now turn to a review of the cyberspace literature. After introducing some general concepts regarding forms of computer-mediated communication, I briefly review research dealing with identity and community online, followed by a look at cyber-subcultures. Some cyberspace research is cultural in nature, but the subculture concept has yet to be used as an analytic tool for Internet research.

### Cyberspace: identity, community and subculture

Cyberspace represents a new and relatively unexplored area for subcultural research. Cyberspace is a virtual environment that has no physical manifestation other than hundreds of millions of computers with access to remote servers and the individuals who sit in front of them.<sup>5</sup> William Gibson, who coined the term in *Neuromancer* (1984), calls cyberspace a “consensual hallucination.” Cyberspace has also been called “the imagined world within the computer” (Shields 1996: 5) and “unreality” (Slouka 1999). Yet, however imaginary or unreal cyberspace may appear to some, its existence is very much the result of interaction between social actors who may or may not share a common f2f culture. Increasingly, Internet, Usenet, listservs, e-mail, instant messaging and other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are becoming more integral activities of everyday life (Haythornthwaite 2001).

Cyberspaces, understood alternatively as nexuses or conduits for communication, may be either synchronous or asynchronous. Emails, Listservs, Usenet, and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) are all examples of asynchronous CMC. The growth rate of these media globally is phenomenal, and younger segments of the population are heavy users (NUA 2002; Pastore 2002; Statistics Finland 2002). Email and listservs are widely known, but Usenet and BBSs are less common and require further description. Usenets are now an archaic form of electronic communication that preceded the abilities of the Internet to host BBSs. Usenets are

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<sup>5</sup> Global Reach (2001) estimates that 217.8 million native English speakers and 266.3 non-native English speakers had online access as of June 2001. Data are divided according to language group. Another site, NUA (2001), estimates the total worldwide number of people online more conservatively at 418.59 million.

accessible by dialing up (via modem) a server that receives and mass distributes messages to subscribers, similarly to email listservs. Usenets have generally been replaced by BBSs, which have World Wide Web addresses and do not require dialing a specific phone number to connect. Internet BBSs, like Usenets and listservs, cater to special-interest groups, communities and subcultures. Subscribers can choose from various topics located on sublevels of a BBS's homepage and post messages for other users to read. One of the added features of BBSs over Usenet is that users can write in HTML and have the ability to integrate images, photos, graphics, music, and other types of multi-media files into interaction.

Subculturalists use computers in different ways, according to individual and subcultural interests and goals. David Bell (2000) recognizes “expressive” and “instrumental” relationships as two ways in which subcultural participants use CMC. An expressive relationship is one in which new technologies define the existence of the subculture. For example, the hacker subculture would not exist without computers, programs and modems, and the individuals who share common norms and beliefs about them and their use. Thus, the hacker subculture has an expressive relationship with computers. An instrumental relationship on the other hand is one in which f2f subcultures use NCTs like the Internet to expand social networks or ease the dissemination of information to participants. In such a case the relationship is one of utility, a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

Many subcultures established in cyberspace are based on both instrumental and expressive human-computer relationships, shared interests and collective action, as well as the search for a virtual commons (Rheingold 2000; Smith & Kollock 1999). A search of community catch-alls like AOL or ICQ (“I seek you”) results in lists of



thousands of online professional, leisure, lifestyle, and special interest forums. In general, such forums are organized around everyday topics that represent aspects of modern life: TV and film fandom, parenting, outdoor life, motorsports and so on, as well as topics such as religion and politics that invite a myriad of participants to engage each other in interaction. Participation in CMC enables individuals the opportunity to establish or affirm meaningful collective identities based on norms and beliefs that are personally important and which are supported by others. Research on the Internet therefore requires consideration of how identities are formed or expressed. Don Slater (1998) remarks that Internet communication is “defined around the absence of physical presence, the fact that we can be interactively present to each other as unanchored textual bodies without being proximate or visible as definite physical objects” (p. 91). He suggests that cyberspace, through its mediated forms, allow us to become more aware of the performative nature of identity. John Coate (1997) echoes this when he writes:

the great equalizing factor, of course, is that nobody can see each other online so the ideas are what really matter. You can't discern age, race, complexion, hair color, body shape, vocal tone, or any of the other attributes that we all incorporate into our impressions of people.... If the balance tips to anyone's advantage, it's in favor of those who are better at articulating their views. (P. 173)

Key is the idea that identity is communicated through discourse. For this reason, Internet research is particularly useful in demonstrating the interactional bases of subcultural identities.

On the Internet, interaction rather than geography has greater centrality in communal and cultural life (Wellman 1997). With the development of CMC, scholarly debates surrounding the concept of community have risen within the

cyberspace literature (see Jones [1995b] for a review). Experience in cyberspace remains for many, philosophical. “The final point of a virtual world is to dissolve the constraints of the anchored world so that we can lift anchor – not to drift aimlessly without point, but to explore anchorage in ever new places” (Heim 1993: 137). I interpret Heim as suggesting not only that the Internet offers new social spaces where identity can be (re)negotiated, but that the main purpose of going online is to experience new forms of social life. This means more than using email to keep in touch with f2f relations, it means searching for new people who share similar tastes or experiences. Bromberg (1996) agrees that cyberspace is “a medium in which and with which some individuals seek meaning” (p. 147). Virtual spaces thus become analogous to virtual conduits, connecting individuals from diverse locations and enabling the growth of meaningful relationships, as well as social contexts, sites of interaction within which identities take root.

Two points concerning the development of cyberspace relationships are relevant to this research. First, isolated individuals can find like-minded others in CMC (Bromberg 1996). Many people who use the Internet are not withdrawing from social interaction (Nie 2001), but are actively seeking it (Rheingold 2000; Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton 2001). Eileen Green illustrates this point as she focuses on the leisure activities of housewives and finds that the Internet represents an “important leisure commodity for women, particularly for socially isolated women whose childcare responsibilities and economic constraints can severely limit the chances for leisure outside the home” (Green & Adam 1998: 304). Likewise for people who are geographically isolated or restricted (such as youth), social life on the Internet can be an emotionally and intellectually satisfying experience.

The second point highlights an opposing perspective, that even within alternative spaces, individuals are oftentimes marginalized or excluded through practices of identification. Using ethnographic data from an online Usenet forum, Ann Travers (2000) illustrates how individuals are labeled and excluded from online interaction through social identifications based on gender, race, and sexuality. Of particular interest is Chapter 3, "Policing the Subject," wherein Travers describes how social control is constructed and negotiated through online discourse. Travers explains how identification constantly work to position individuals into categories of insiders versus outsiders. Individuals are marginalized online through a number of rhetorical strategies, such as ignoring a person's posts, threatening sanctions for behavior deemed inappropriate by those in charge, ridiculing or contesting a person's statements, and even insulting, verbally attacking, and threatening individuals. People identified as outsiders are devalued through labeling processes, often based upon questioning the normality of the body. Labels that rely on racial slurs, questioning heterosexual commitments, and medicalizing individuals as insane are common textual methods of identification, which label certain participants as outsiders and therefore less worthy of inclusion as insiders.

Susan Zickmund's (1997) work on cyberhate highlights similar methods of how outsiders are categorically labeled in racist subcultural rhetoric on the Internet. Zickmund argues that racist subcultures are historically close-knit, community-based groups that socially construct a subcultural image of themselves vis-à-vis the Other. In hate-based cyberspaces, the other is constructed as a deviant that must be controlled, expelled or eliminated to preserve a so-called natural order. The Other

represents danger and is symbolized as an impetus for action. Zickmund shows how racial and ethnic minorities are constructed as conspirators, agents of hegemony, and ultimately a scapegoats, responsible for the problems that affect racist subcultural members.

Zickmund offers empirical evidence of how a racist subculture is maintained and supported in online forums both through interaction among racist participants, as well as through interaction between racists and antagonistic outsiders. On one side, hate-based subcultures are partly constructed online by individuals who share similar values and beliefs and who communicate with each other within the boundaries of a particular argot (Billig 2001). Sharing in racist rhetoric such as jokes allows participants to express their subcultural affiliation and strengthening category-based identity. What is most significant about Zickmund's work is how she shows a second side, that interactions across subcultural boundaries have a similar effect, as racist members are given the opportunity to demonstrate support of subcultural norms and values through engaging in dialogue with antagonistic outsiders who log in to racist sites, again strengthening cohesion around a shared set of values and beliefs. Similarly, Michael Billig's (2001) research on the discursive construction of minorities through humor on racist websites shows how subcultures are spread on the Internet and how self and Other are constructed.

Theorizing and research on cyberspace relates to the study of straightedge subculture online in two important ways. First, it highlights the relationship(s) between NCTs like the Internet and subcultural users as well as illustrating how the Internet facilitates movement of information across subcultural boundaries. Subcultural argot, when set as key words in Internet search engines, may facilitate

subcultural diffusion through contact with non-subcultural participants. Second, analyses that highlight the interactions among insiders and between insiders and Others shed light on the dynamics of how a subculture is interactionally created and how its borders are policed online. Research into Internet-based subcultural forums should include careful analysis of the norms and beliefs expressed by participants, along with how they identify with the subculture and with Others. Such analyses should be sensitive to how cultural phenomena are created through interaction between online participation. The following questions seem pertinent for subcultures online: What types of subcultural information is available for individuals who search online? Can a unified and cohesive view of a particular subculture be transmitted through cyberspace? Who determines the authenticity of a subculture and of subcultural participants online?

### Key concepts

Concepts from sociology, social psychology, and cultural studies help provide an interpretive gloss on the textual presence of participants. Because I chose a grounded theory approach to the research project (see chap. 3: 'Research strategies'), concepts were not chosen before the analysis. Rather I continuously revisited the literature as I coded and analyzed the data. Through a reflexive process of analysis and literature review, a picture of the straightedge forum emerges that is neither conceptually forced nor merely descriptive.

Several concepts are used as analytical guides in the substantive chapters ahead. For example, in Chapter 5 I use the frame of reference concept from Cohen's (1955) strain theory. Subcultural frames of reference are theorized at two analytic

levels: the cultural level, where it is synonymous with subcultural norms; and the social psychological level, where it functions to define the participant's interpretation of social action. The frame of reference concept is used to map out the various ways in which straightedge is understood by participants as a normative structure to which participants affiliate (cultural), and to highlight the various ways in which participants report on their idiosyncratic understandings of subcultural experiences in interaction with other forum participants.

Subcultural researchers from the cultural studies tradition are especially keen on the notion of style in subcultural analysis (Clarke 1976b; Hebdige 1979). I combine this work with recent Internet research on usernames, signature files and avatars (Schleef 1996; Talamo and Ligorio 2001; Travers 2000). Together, they facilitate analysis of how straightedge style is articulated by participants and how these concepts contextualize identity claims and make certain aspects of identity salient online (see Williams 2003).

Fine and Kleinman's (1979) interactionist conceptualization of subculture relies heavily on the concept of communication interlocks. One of their main goals was to move past Blumer's (1969) assertion that cultural items are products of face-to-face interaction. The ways of interlocking they describe are argued to be mechanisms through which cultural information is passed between group and facilitates the development of a subculture. I develop their concept further and suggest how the Internet operates as an additional type of communication interlock.

To describe aspects of subcultural identity, I use the concepts of commitment, authenticity, and affiliation to illuminate how participants self-identify with straightedge, how they express subcultural selves, and how they construct

distinctions that separate insiders from outsiders. These concepts, taken from IT and SIT/SCT (Hogg et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000; Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000), are briefly defined.

Commitment is defined by Stryker (Stryker and Serpe 1982) as the degree to which a “person’s relationships to specified sets of others depends on his or her...occupying a particular position in an organized structure of relationships and playing a particular role” (cited in Deaux and Martin 2003: 103). In this definition, commitment is linked explicitly with a social role. I broaden the definition of commitment to take social identity into account. In addition to commitment to social roles, individuals also express commitment to social categories. Thus, commitment can also be conceived by how individuals identify themselves and others. Kathryn Fox (1987) uses a role-based definition in her analysis of a punk community to hierarchically classify subcultural participants. She argues that punk participants are divisible into categories, with “hardcore” participants occupying the subcultural center, and “softcore punks,” “preppie punks” and “spectators” occupying increasingly peripheral roles. Commitment is measured according to “physical appearance and lifestyles” (p. 351). However, her analysis is lacking because it measures commitment only by how hardcore participants evaluate themselves and others rather than how individuals from each member type define their commitment.

Fox’s failure to represent the voice of so-called peripheral participants and to validate her analysis of who is committed to the subculture and how that commitment is expressed draws attention to the links between commitment and the concept of authenticity. In contrast to Fox’s findings, David Muggleton (2000)

demonstrates that subcultural participants regularly identify themselves as authentic participants of subcultures at the expense of others, who are seen as inauthentic. Authenticity is not to be understood only by commitment to a social identity. Rather, authenticity may represent a commitment to one's personal values and beliefs instead of to a category.

My use of the authenticity concept derives from Sue Widdicombe's social psychological research on language and youth subcultures. An early definition of authenticity in her work is "having the correct grounds for affiliation" (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990:257). The concept was subsequently modified to analyze how self-authenticity "is partly dependent on warranting claims not to have been influenced by others, subject to peer pressure and conformity" (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995: 212). Within subcultures, participants see themselves as unique and express their authenticity in individualized ways (Widdicombe 1998a; see also Muggleton 2000). In contrast to Fox's research, Widdicombe claims that authenticity serves a personal as well as a social function and demonstrates how participants in subcultures use claims to authenticity to support a categorical identity. Kembrew McLeod (1999) conceives of six different semantic dimensions of subcultural authenticity: social-psychological; racial; political-economic; gender-sexual; social locational; and cultural. His analysis of authenticity within the hip-hop music subculture "highlights the valorization of individualism and the demonization of conformity" (p. 140). Authenticity, conceptualized as both discursive and situational, is used to demonstrate what is at stake for participants who identify with the straightedge subculture.



As Widdicombe pointed out above, authenticity has to do with justifying one's affiliation with a subculture or category. I define affiliation as closely connecting to or associating with something. Participants in the forum all affiliate with other forum members via explicitly shared norms, and to a lesser extent self-identification. Their interests in straightedge norms and beliefs brought each person to the forum and served as a connection to the subculture. Some forum participants express their affiliation at the level of a individual identity – they write about straightedge as a role with behavioral expectations. Other participants express their affiliation through constructing social identities – they write about straightedge as a category with boundaries that separate its members from outsiders. I analyze forum posts at both levels of affiliation.

While SIT/SCT focus on the effects of distinguishing between social categories at the social psychological level of analysis, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction offers a similar tool, but at the cultural level of analysis. In his book, *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu uses his concept of cultural capital to show how cultural and social hierarchies correlate to one another, thereby arguing that cultural tastes operate as markers of social class. Cultural capital works through a method of distinguishing the high from the low, the extraordinary from the ordinary, and so on. This distinction relates to the earlier review of Williams' (1976) and Gans' (1999) critiques of the high versus popular culture debate. Distinguishing between high and low culture is analytically similar to SCT's distinctions between in-group and out-groups, and the accompanying discourse of superiority of one over the other (Hogg, et al. 1995).

Bourdieu is well known for distinguishing a host of other forms of capital as well, an important one of which is social capital. Whereas cultural capital relates to *what* one knows, social capital corresponds to *who* one knows – through social networks individuals earn respect, clout, etc. and thus status. Social capital also is analytically similar to identity theorizing that focuses on the perceived benefits of category membership to the individual. Sarah Thornton links subcultural capital to authenticity, which she refers to as “hipness” (after Becker [1963]) or “being in the know” (Thornton 1995:11). In her study of rave/club culture, she demonstrates how “different social groups are consequently engaged in struggles over [sub]cultural capital with a view to legitimating their own personal identities as *the* lifestyle, a process that involves making distinctions from other groups” (Muggleton 2000:64).

Identifications and distinctions have determination and power issues embedded within them. Domination and resistance are also linked directly with identification (Jenkins 1996). By highlighting this point, I emphasize the accomplished nature of identity. This point is important to research on Internet-based subcultures. Aspects of identity, such as embodied signifiers (e.g., race, age, sex) are not visually apparent to online participants during interaction. Instead, participants use and interpret subcultural symbols such as style, argot, and labeling in identity-making processes. Research needs to also focus on such aspects of identification (Eckert 2003).

## Summary

Subcultural theorizing developed in multiple traditions that span nearly a century of sociological and cultural work. The majority of this work has ethnic, male youth as its focal concern. Youth subcultures are not to be equated with a generalized youth culture. Rather, youth subcultures highlight the variety of ways of 'being in the world' that youth in various structural positions experience.

Subcultural theories necessarily take culture as a defining characteristic; subcultural theories and studies thus work (to varying degrees) at understanding both the lived experiences of subcultural youth and how subcultural frames of reference are generated, maintained, and changed.

Early ecological and strain theories used sociological variables such as neighborhood, class, and delinquency to highlight both the cultural and structural phenomena that brought individuals to participate in subcultural (i.e., deviant) behaviors and consequences for the individual. Work at the Chicago School was responsible for the earliest iterations of subcultural theorizing, as well as establishing qualitative methodologies, such as empirical observation and the interview, as crucial to competent sociological and cultural analysis. Later strain theorizing emphasized economic and later psychological bases for subcultural affiliation and assumed that subcultures arose largely as reactions to the strains caused by disjunctures between dominant American cultural goals and the means to achieve them.

New subcultural theories sought to interrogate all of the conditions and social forces that led youth to subcultural participation (Cagle 1989), yet CCCS work largely limited its analysis to the effect of class on youth subcultures. Such

theorizing often employed semiotic methods to decode the meanings of hegemony and subcultural style. New subcultural theories also influenced subsequent conjunctural studies of youth and youth subcultural by locating subcultural phenomena in historical and geographic moments.

Interactionism, while an important fixture in the earliest work on subcultures, re-announced its interest in subcultural theory via Fine and Kleinman (1979). Subsequent interactionist work has created a rich and detailed understanding of the nature of various cultures (Denzin 1992, 1999; Fine 1983, 1987). Identity and social identity theories (IT and SIT/SCT) offer various conceptual keys for understanding the relationship between individuals and subcultures. Combining aspects of both theoretical traditions can provide fuller analyses of subcultural phenomena.

Recently, work has emerged that interrogates the role of NCTs in subcultures. Contemporary work has focused on expressive and instrumental relationships with these technologies, but the literature remains scant. While there is important work going on that relates cultural life to cyberspace, this work is conceptualized by community rather than subculture. By drawing from the subculture, identity, and cyberspace literatures, I will describe some aspects of the straightedge subculture on the Internet.

## CHAPTER 3

### Research questions and methods

#### Research questions

Straightedge first appeared as a music-based phenomenon that arose from within the punk/hardcore music scenes in the early 1980s. A subculture emerged and was spread through f2f interaction and the international distribution of straightedge music. Two decades later, straightedge scenes exist on the Internet. This dissertation is a case study of a straightedge Internet website, the explicit goal of which is to learn more about how straightedge participants utilize the Internet to discuss straightedge. The research makes an important contribution by taking a subcultural approach in its analysis of straightedge on the Internet. Five broad research questions are addressed in this research. Subsequent chapters answer each of them through the process of qualitative inquiry.

First, how does the website under investigation represent the characteristics of straightedge? Following from Brake's suggestion that "the values, norms, symbols, imagery and behavior of the subculture need to be considered by their organization" (1985:20), I question how such subcultural components are organized in an online environment. I establish the type of subcultural information that is available for individuals on this website, how is it presented for users, and whether a cohesive subcultural frame of reference is visible to the website forum's members and visitors.

Second, what can research on a straightedge Internet site reveal about how Internet users express processes of subcultural style, affiliation, and boundaries? Previous research on subculture has shown participants in subcultures feel

alienated from or opposed to mainstream culture (Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960), which may be articulated through style (Clarke 1976b; Hebdige 1979), how individuals affiliate with the subculture, and how they construct boundaries between themselves and outsiders. Similarly, recent research on cyberspace has demonstrated that online communities are established based on sets of shared values and that insider and outsider distinctions are important (Mitra 2000; Zickmund 1997).

Third, what are the differences between Internet participants who discover the straightedge subculture online versus those who are socialized via f2f scenes? While f2f straightedge scenes have hardcore music as a cohesive element of shared culture, Internet straightedgers may not. I seek to understand the extent to which differences exist between these two straightedge member types online.

Fourth, what can research on an Internet forum uncover about how participants express their individual interpretations of straightedge norms? Taking Fine and Kleinman (1979) argument that subcultures are heterogeneous in nature, I question whether sufficient data exist on the Internet to capture the heterogeneous aspects of the straightedge subculture? My investigation exposes how forum participants actively negotiate the meaning of straightedge norms by asserting their opinions and beliefs.

Fifth and lastly, what can the subculture concept offer to the study of straightedge? I consider the relevance of this research for the broader relationship between the Internet and straightedge. In answering such a question, I assess what was learned through analysis of data, and discuss the implications of the Internet and the subculture concept for straightedge.

## Research strategies

I combine case study and grounded theory approaches to collect data for this dissertation. Neither is a method for research. Rather, both are meta-methodological perspectives within which methods are planned and implemented. These approaches fit the exploratory and emergent nature of the research project.

The case study approach to a subculture online allows the researcher to focus significant attention on the case itself, to understand the processes and complexities that make up the case. The case study approach can be construed as a continuum along which various methodologies lie. Robert Stake (2000) bifurcates the case study continuum into two halves, though the reasons for studying a case are more complex (see Hamel 1992). At one end of the continuum lies an appreciation of the intrinsic complexities of the case in-and-of itself. There is no intent on the part of the researcher to go beyond an understanding of the case – what Stake calls an intrinsic case study. At the opposite end, the case may be studied within a larger research frame, usually for the purpose of explaining more general phenomena or for generating or extending theory. Stake calls this an instrumental case study. This project represents both an intrinsic and an instrumental case study approach. On one hand, I am interested in understanding the intrinsic nature of the online forum under investigation – how and why it works – without claims for generalizability. On the other hand, this project offers insight into the communicative nature of subcultures, in particular how the Internet serves as a new medium for subcultural life. The instrumental case study approach supports my attempt to further cultural and sociological understanding.

A constructivist grounded theory strategy (Charmaz 2000) supports my exploratory approach to data collection and analysis. While grounded theory may be conceived as a positivist or post-positivist undertaking that seeks to generate middle-range sociological theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1994), Kathy Charmaz (2000) offers a constructivist theorization in which the internal validity of the case being studied is given precedence over its generalizability to other research. Her interpretation recognizes the conjunctural nature of social phenomena and the construction of the research story through interaction between researcher and subjects. Her version of grounded theory emphasizes doing whatever type of research is necessary to understand the process being analyzed, relying on multiple data sources and collection techniques, simultaneously collecting and analyzing data, and moving inductively from data to conceptual mapping, but does not arrive at middle-range theories.

In this project I aligned my work with some of grounded theory's analytic methods, rather than using grounded theory methods per se. For example, I agreed with Charmaz's emphases on immersion of the researcher in the data, constant note-taking and writing, and relying on multiple perspectives to corroborate data analysis. But, I did not focus exclusive attention on generating new concepts, nor did I avoid pre-existing concepts that could inform my analysis. I took past conceptual work on subcultures and cyberspace into consideration as I analyzed data, and either used or modified concepts as necessary for descriptive clarity.

The analysis highlights how forum participants write about straightedge as an experience. Internal rather than external validity is therefore considered of the utmost importance. The internal validity of the research relies on an accurate



description of the case's characteristics. I follow a constructivist conception of qualitative inquiry (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln 2000) in which validity is measured by the extent to which the voices represented in the research are recognized and accepted by the participants who created them. This approach to validation requires a rapport with and reliance on participants to become part of the story. I attempted to garner feedback from participants throughout the study, and to work towards a representation of the case in congruence with participant's own perspectives. I actively participated in threads and constantly asking participants to clarify what they meant in specific posts. I also interviewed some of the most active participants (see below) to gain a more in-depth understanding of the topics being discussed and their perceived importance within the Straight Edge Discussion forum.

Internal validity is an important dimension of the descriptive strength of this approach, but it does not address external validity. As such, I do not expect that my findings will be generalizable in the sense of scientific 'truth.' Instead, "they constitute a set of...concepts that other researchers can transport to similar research problems" (Charmaz 2000:524). By describing the processes through which individuals participants in a straightedge forum on the Internet, other Internet researchers may become sensitized to similar processes at work in other cases or sets of cases. To clarify the meanings that data hold within the case, multiple data sources and methods are used to "triangulate" analysis and to corroborate evidence (Creswell 1998).

## Data sources

### *Bulletin board forum*

Subcultures arise online through CMC, which may take many different forms. It may be either synchronous or asynchronous, and may use various platforms, such as Internet relay chats (IRCs), multi-user domains (MUDs), email listservs, and bulletin board systems (BBSs). The first two are examples of synchronous CMC, while the latter pair is asynchronous (see Kollock and Smith [1999] for a review of the various forms of CMC; see Rheingold [2000] for a social history of these platforms).

The website under investigation is administered on the Internet from outside the US and has a World Wide Web address. I found the website under investigation using an Internet search engines, such as Google (<http://www.google.com>), Webcrawler (<http://www.webcrawler.com>), or Lycos (<http://www.lycos.com>). Many different websites were returned from my Internet searches and I made initial forays into several of them. The straightedge forum that I chose to study was found on a public access BBS, meaning that anyone with Internet access was able to view the contents of the site by entering an HTTP web address into an Internet browser (e.g., Netscape or Internet Explorer).

The website is one of several similar straightedge website and thus was chosen from several potential candidates. There were four specific reasons for ultimately choosing this particular website. To begin, it was the first straightedge website with a forum that I visited. Using an Internet search engine, I located several straightedge-specific websites. Most of these sites contained information; a very few contained forums. I joined the site and began interacting with other participants

not as a sociologist, but as an ex-straightedger who was interested in re-acquainting himself with the subculture. Secondly, I was welcomed by the participants at that time and quickly was at ease interacting with them. I joined another straightedge forum not long after joining the first and noticed that there was some (self-reported) overlap in membership. I engaged participants of both forums in a similar way, but perceived that participants on the first site were more interested in openly discussing diverse perspectives and issues than the other. I noticed that the second site was home to more frequent flame wars, and other people who were participants of both site reported similar findings. I also noticed that the first website's owner/administrator and moderators<sup>6</sup> were individuals who seemed keen on providing a safe environment within which members and guests could participate. For example, I either observed or participated in confrontations with individual posters who used racist or sexist language against others. In general, members frowned upon such behavior and worked as a community to censure offensive discourse. Lastly, I decided after reviewing a few other websites that this site was most likely to remain operational for a sufficient amount of time for me to do the project. Other sites I visited were occasionally non-functional due to

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<sup>6</sup> There is one owner/administrator. As the title suggests, this person created the site, owns the web address, and is responsible for its administration. The owner/administrator is assisted in the day-to-day site administration by moderators, whom he selects. According to reports from the owner and moderators, moderators are chosen based on their level of activity in the forums and their self-disclosed willingness to help out. I noticed also that the moderators share a similar interpretation of how straightedge *ought* to be defined; thus moderators do not represent all the various perspectives found among the membership (see Chap. 6). Moderators have the ability to modify various aspects of the forum, most significantly changing or deleting other participants' posts and banning participants. I know of only 2 instances of banning and one of modifying a post. Two members were banned after repeating warnings regarding their abusive and insulting language. These two individuals made personal attacks on other forum participants and filled up threads with useless posts. On one occasion, a person's post was modified by a moderator. The person had used racial slurs in a post and the moderator deleted the post, replacing with a warning to others not to use racial or sexual slurs.

memory quotas being exceeded or the administrator not having paid for the bandwidth. The chosen site was always functional during my early visits.

I do not make any claims for how representative this website forum is as a part of the straightedge subculture. The ideas about straightedge expressed there are similar to my experiences and to other research on the straightedge subculture. Other aspects of the forum, for example the presence of multiple ethnicities and female participants in the forum, are atypical, at least for previous findings that describe straightedge as dominated by white males (Lahickey 1998; Willis 1993; Wood 1999b).

The entire website is dedicated to information about the straightedge subculture. It utilizes an asynchronous BBS, wherein individuals post messages in forums that anyone with an Internet connection and a Web browser can access and read. I contacted the website's owner/administrator via email, explained my research project, and received approval to download and reproduce any and all materials from the site for academic/research purposes. The website's owner/administrator also invited me to request any additional information I might need from him directly. I subsequently had a message placed on the forum's homepage that announced who I was, what type of research I was doing and why. The message also invited participants to contact me directly with questions if they had any.

Because the website has public access, anyone with Internet access is allowed to view the site in its entirety. Participants may become members of the forum by choosing a user name and password, but non-members can also interact by logging in as a guest. Forums are divided among several broad BBs, including "Straightedge

Forum	Content	Last Post	Moderator
<b>Straight Edge &amp; Stuff</b>			
 <a href="#">Welcome</a> New to the forums? Introduce yourself and get to know everyone!	407 Threads 8110 Posts	 <a href="#">nessness</a> ( <a href="#">View Profile</a> ) Today, 04:29 PM	<a href="#">View Moderator</a>
 <a href="#">Straight Edge Discussion</a> For the discussion of all things straight edge.	597 Threads 15800 Posts	 <a href="#">what do you look like?</a> ( <a href="#">View Profile</a> ) Today, 04:38 PM	<a href="#">View Moderator</a>
 <a href="#">Vegetarianism/Vegonism</a> Talk about your non animal induced lifestyles.	422 Threads 5032 Posts	 <a href="#">Err... somewhat related?</a> ( <a href="#">View Profile</a> ) Today, 09:47 AM	<a href="#">View Moderator</a>

Figure 3.1 – The “Straight Edge & Stuff” bulletin board

and Stuff,” “General Forums,” and “Forums that make you think.” Within each BB are between three and five forums, listed by name and including the description that appears with it on-screen. Figure 3.1 (above) provides an image of the “Straight Edge & Stuff” bulletin board. Participants can click on ‘threads’ within each forum to interact. Threads are textual conversations that are organized chronologically on the BBS forum main webpage. Once a thread is chosen, participants can read the statements, remarks or questions posed by the thread’s originator and other participants and may add their own voice to the conversation if they chose. Those who do not want to add to the thread may continue on to any other thread on the forum. On the forum’s main webpage, a counter keeps track of the number of people who have viewed the thread contents and the number of people who have contributed. When they post in a thread, participants are identified by their username and specific other information they may wish to disclose (details in chap. 4). Once a post has been added to a thread, it can be edited by its creator or by a moderator, who has restricted access to the website. The forums thus provide a history of all the conversations that have taken place in the public spaces of the BBS.

The forum analyzed exists in two parts, both of which I refer to as the Straight Edge Discussion forum. The first part existed from February 3 – September 17,

2001, when the server crashed. It took nearly two weeks to rebuild and upload the new forum. During this time, I was given special access by the owner/administrator to salvage whatever I wanted for research purposes. I was able to download TXT versions of all messages from the Straight Edge Discussion forum, but the dates of posts and all images (e.g., avatars, emoticons) were lost in the process. Instead of rebuilding the BBS with the existing data, the administrator decided to open an updated version of the forum, which was empty. This second part was opened on September 30, 2001 and was taken offline on April 8, 2003 after it had accumulated so much data that significant lag was being experienced by participants. The newest version opened the next day and was not analyzed.

### *Forum participants*

I collected data from forum participants in two ways: first through analysis of messages posted in the online forum; and second through in-depth interviews with selected key informants. Key informants were selected using a theoretical sampling format (Glaser and Strauss 1967) according to their level of participation, which I measured by total number of posts<sup>7</sup>, the extent to which I noticed their participation in the threads, or their perspectives regarding various aspects of straightedge subculture. For example, I decided early in the research project that interviewing the website's owner would be necessary. I wanted to interview individuals who seemed to be the most involved in day-to-day interactions on the site, as well as

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<sup>7</sup> At the time that I was selecting potential key informants, the website hosted a tool that measured the frequency of participation (frequency = number of posts/number of days as a member). This tool gave me the opportunity to measure fluctuations in involvement. Unfortunately, this tool was abruptly removed from the site and I had not recorded fluctuations for key informants. I was able to compute the total posts manually for key informants later, but this statistic is not as revealing as frequency of posts would have been.

some people who frequented the forum for some time and then quit posting, or who had chosen not to re-register when the forum crashed in September, 2001. I also wanted to include both “hardcore” and “non-hardcore” straightedgers, and non-straightedge participants (see chap. 6). Table 3.1 (below) provides some statistical information on the key informants and me. I sent private messages to participants who posted relatively frequently and asked them to participate in an in-depth interview. This strategy helped build a more substantial database and reduced the risk of my interpretations differing from the intentions of participants themselves. More than treating the forum as text that can be semiotically analyzed, I asked questions to participants to garner feedback from them on subcultural issues as they arose in the analysis.

I had access to participants through several communicative media. I initiated contact with forum participants by posting to threads or starting new threads and asking questions. Questioning in this manner was a public activity and invited participation from all forum members and visitors. I also had the option of sending private messages to any online participants. Private messages, or ‘whispers,’ Internet Relay Chat (IRC) usernames. Participants who utilized any of these synchronous or asynchronous programs could thus be contacted outside of the website. To represent participant’s voices in my analysis, I set off extracts from the forum by using a different font. I also avoided making any grammatical or spelling changes.

Because my focus is on Internet aspects of subculture, I made no attempt to contact any participants through any means other than electronic. In this way, participant’s ‘real life’ identities remain protected. Never meeting participants f2f

**Table 3.1 – Key informant statistics**

Date registered	Username	Rank *	Total posts	Posts per day*
09/30/2001	TheMan	22	2360	4.25
10/01/2001	Nebula	13	3546	6.40
10/02/2001	Patrick	100	338	0.69
10/26/2001	WhiteTrash	91	375	0.71
01/08/2002	SubPush	8	5288	11.62
04/07/2002	Brantley	16	3331	9.10
05/21/2002	PunkRockBob	5	6967	21.64
09/09/2002	ThreeSixNine	20	2666	12.64
10/22/2002	Nori Aoki	222	65	0.39
Did not re-register	Punkgrrrl	n/a	n/a	n/a

raises the issue of whether the cyber-identities of participants are authentic and therefore in need of protection. As Kate Eichhorn asks, “without face-to-face encounters, without the ability to ‘capture’ one’s research participants and bring them into sight, how can the ethnographer obtain the empirical evidence that continues to lie at the center of his/her studies? What is the professional fate of the ethnographer whose work cannot account for real bodies” (Eichhorn 2001: 566)? There was no way to be sure whether participants maintained one or more identities simultaneously. I was aware of several individuals who used multiple identities sequentially in the forum, but never heard of any cases of simultaneous usage. The inability of the ethnographer to tag real bodies should not keep research from being done. Rather, it is another aspect of the research problem that must be taken into account.

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\* Rank is based on the total number of posts in the forums between the opening date (09/30/2001) and the closing date (04/08/2003). There were 1,365 registered members during this time, 928 of whom posted at least once in a forum.



## Methods

The form of online inquiry utilized combines more engaged methodologies such as participant observation and interviewing with unobtrusive measures such as qualitative content analysis. Like Kate Eichhorn's (2001) ethnography of Riot Grrrl fanzines, my own research is of "sites unseen." The individual participants I study are not physically known to me and the forum is not geographically recognizable. These conditions do not mean that a subculture cannot exist, nor that online social relationships are not amenable to sociological and cultural analyses. I argue that it is possible to carry out an online ethnography using a computer and Internet access to collect all relevant data and to develop a detailed picture of the forum being studied. I call this process cyberethnography, after Ward (1999).

Cyberethnography is ethnographic in the following senses. First, the researcher attempts a holistic description and interpretation of a socio-cultural system through immersion into a cultural field. The researcher seeks to describe both the emic and etic perspectives of the forum participants being studied through expressions of norms and beliefs, and behaviors (Cresswell 1998). One goal is therefore to interpret the symbolic universe within which forum participants interact. Second, the cyberethnographer approaches the research site with the knowledge that her/his biography (including past experiences, values and emotions) play a role in how any story will be told (Weber 1949). Third, a cyberethnographic study demands that the researcher invest significant time and energy into the forum under investigation. According to Stake (2000), a "qualitative case study is characterized by researchers spending extended time, on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, revising meaning of what is

going on” (p. 455). Fourth, cyberethnography research passes through three phases: description, analysis and interpretation. These phases are problematic inasmuch as they are not linear. Rather, they overlap and circle each other during and after the research project.

My cyberethnographic approach is divided into two complementary halves. A large portion of my time *in situ* is spent reading the comments of other participants. Such work is done without their immediate knowledge, which I call “observation ethnography” (Bainbridge 2000). The passive examination of subcultural texts is complemented by “a full cycle of communication with human beings over the Web, asking question and receiving answer in a manner analogous to interviews,” which can be termed “informant ethnography” (Bainbridge 2000: 57). Below I describe how both observation and informant ethnographic methods were brought to bear.

#### *Participant observation, focused discussions, and in-depth interviews*

Informant ethnographic methods took the form of participant observation, including focused discussions and in-depth-interviewing. One unique characteristic of interaction in this research is that participants relied primarily on text to communicate subculturally-relevant information. Participant observation was thus accomplished by being textually seen on the website, which was accomplished by posting in threads. Only through posting to threads did members become aware of each others’ participation. A counter was attached to each poster’s username anytime they posted a message. In this way members could judge their

participation relative to others'.<sup>8</sup> When I first entered the forum, I became quickly known as an 'old schooler,' a person who had been straightedge during the 1980s or early 1990s. There were several individuals online who also claimed to be or were identified as "old school." In this role we offered our own interpretations of what straightedge meant to us when we had been teenagers and what we thought about certain issues now. Many current participants expressed interest in our knowledge of the early years, which facilitated my acceptance in the forum.

My identity within the straightedge forum further developed through participation in what I call "focused discussions." A focused discussion is a similar to focus group research in some respects. A focus group is "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger 1994: 6). Focus groups are led by a moderator who steers the direction of conversation. The moderator is responsible for setting the topic of discussion, stopping participants who wander off the topic, and ensuring that participants express themselves as fully as possible. The goal of such research is not to force consensus but rather to gather the opinions of individual participants as they interact with other participants. Unlike focus groups, which are carefully constructed in order to represent particular types of respondents, a focused discussion is open for all participants. One need only be interested and motivated enough to post. Also, whereas focus groups are

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<sup>8</sup> As of October 15, 2002, out of more than 625 active members, I was ranked 81<sup>st</sup> in terms of total posts made in all forums. I define members as anyone who has (a) registered for an account username and (b) posted at least one message to the boards. There were approximately 400 additional affiliated 'lurkers' – individuals who registered for an account username, but had not posted a message, for a total of more than 1,300 registered users.

constrained by the amount of time they have to meet, a focused discussion is limited only to the extent that the forum remains active.

I started focused discussion in the forum on straightedge-related topics and then allowed participants to read and respond. Participants conversed with me and with other participants as they each described their own viewpoints. By monitoring the thread daily, I could bring the conversation back on track when it digressed, ask follow-up questions based on initial responses, and request participation from others who may not have responded. Early in the research process I began several focused discussions to test the appropriateness of the method. The results were promising in that, not only did I regularly receive useful feedback from participants, but they regularly worked with quoted prior posts as they framed their own answers to my questions.

In-depth interviews with key informants supplemented the focused discussion method to gain clarification on the meaning of subcultural forms and activities. A total of nine in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting between 90 and 180 minutes. All interviews took place online using either an IM or IRC program, both of which are popular among young Internet users (Cyberatlas 2002; Nielsen NetRatings 2002). I created an interview schedule early in the project but left it semi-structured so that I could develop and change questions as my research revealed new areas of interest. I asked any participants who sent me private messages if they were at least 18 and would like to be interviewed. In actual interviewing, I would establish a direct connection with interviewees and then open my interview schedule in MS Word. I would then cut and paste questions from my interview schedule into the IM/IRC window and then read along as respondents

answered my questions (see Figure 3.2 below). I would add additional questions not listed in the interview schedule when appropriate to improve my understanding of respondent's answers or to follow tangents that I felt were worthy of further attention.

### *Qualitative content analysis*

My observation ethnographic methods were based on interpretive ethnographic content analysis methods (Ahuvia 2001; Altheide 1996, 2002). Unlike traditional quantitative content analysis (see Holsti 1969; Weber 1990), interpretive content analysis rejects both the ability of the researcher to achieve objectivity as well as the reliability of intercoder reliability. Interpretive content analysis uses the concept of “public justifiability” to contrast intercoder reliability (Ahuvia 2001:146) and argues for the validity of a single researcher's interpretation of a text. Interpretive content analysis focuses on analyzing the latent content of social texts for the purpose of understanding their connotative meanings within a contextual frame. This form of interpretive content analysis melds well with ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1996) because both provide an interpretive basis for the analysis of texts. Both allow the researcher to develop empirically-based coding schemes instead of using pre-defined concepts into which the data must be made to fit. This technique requires that much more detail be given regarding the context of interpersonal communication. I consequently had to pay close attention to various aspects of interaction online, including relating posts to each other temporally and analyzing the context within which things were said.

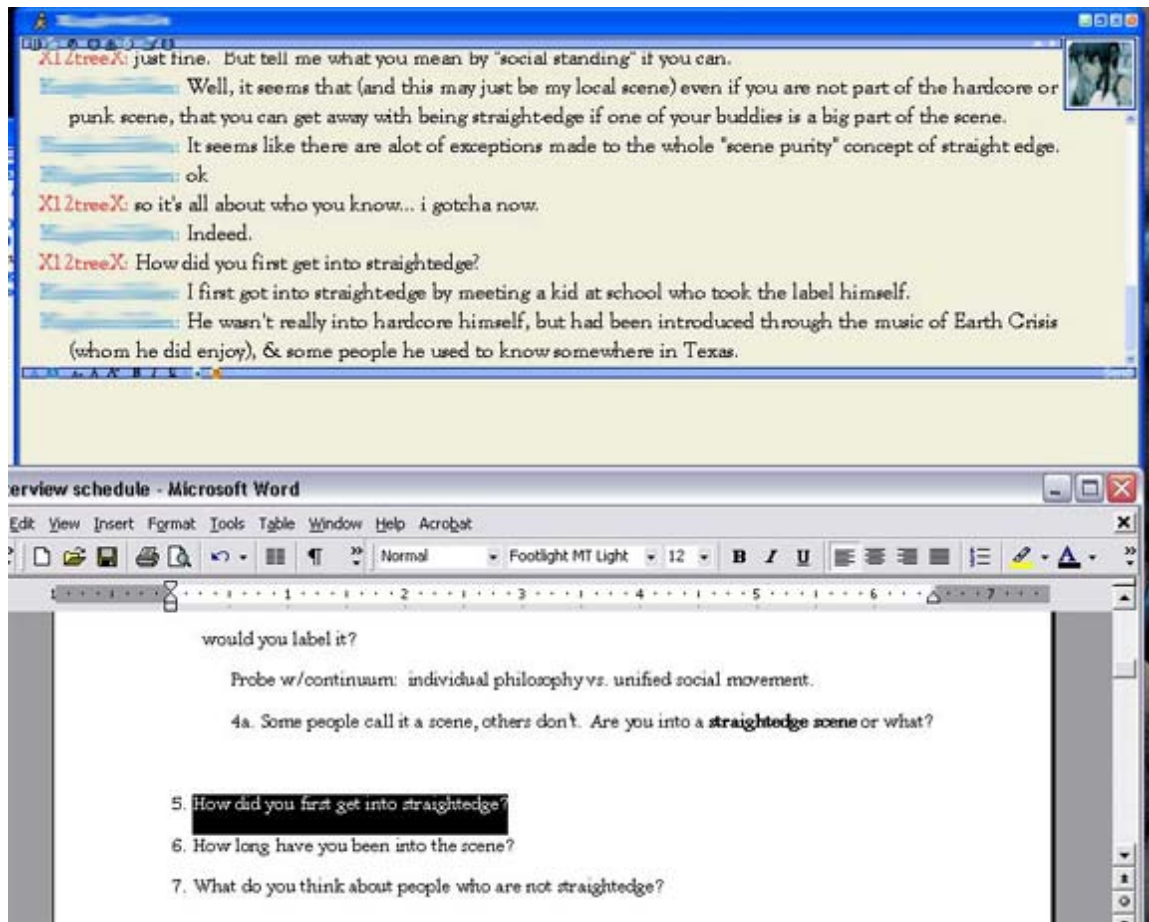


Figure 3.2 – An interview in progress

My analysis was facilitated by the QSR NVivo software package, which allows a large degree of freedom in how the researcher develops coding schemes and data analysis (Bourdon 2002; Welsh 2002). The coding scheme emerged through the analysis of data and did not pre-exist the study (details in chap. 4). I developed the coding scheme independent of conceptual development and relied instead on participants' own words as a coding guide.

### Establishing an interpretive context

An important methodological concern was how to contextualize the forum and its participants sociologically. Was I studying a group, a series of conversations, or something else? Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif define a group as "...a number of individuals who stand in (more or less) definite status and role relationships to one another..." (Sherif and Sherif 1956: 144). Werner Landecker (1964) distinguishes some additional criteria of a group. A group must be delimited from reference to membership size; it must be distinguished from a category through an integrated social structure; and its social integration must be seen to vary among participants in strength and form.

The main problem with using the term group is that not all forum participants considered the forums to be a group. Some spoke about membership in the forums, but many others did not. Interviewees did not write about any sense of obligation to other participants. Rather they reported that the forums were a social space where they could share their opinions and discover others' opinions about various subcultural topics. There was no limit to the number of participants who could participate within the forum, but I was able to view the number of registered

members. Interactional norms were visible in individuals' posts, though there were varying degrees of normative integration, or "netiquette" (Rinaldi 1998). Some individuals posted messages that moved conversations forward, while others were more antagonistic. In two cases, individuals were banned from the forum for their belligerent behaviors. Thus, group was not what I studied.

The Straight Edge Discussion forum was comprised of members, not all of whom were active. By member, I mean anyone who had applied for and received a username and password for the forum. Some were "participants," and others were "lurkers." Lurkers were those who registered as members of the BBS, but never posted a message. Participants, on the other hand, were active in the forum to varying degrees. Some posted only once, many averaged between one post per day and one per week, while the most active averaged nearly one post per hour (see Table 3.1). Participants' activity also varied by content. Some tended to ask questions, other tended to give advice. Some were quite open to divergent perspectives and tolerant of opposing views, others were not. Yet all participants identified with straightedge subculture to some degree and constituted something more cohesive than the category "Internet forum user", but less than a group.

Rather than studying Internet users, either individually or collectively, I shifted analytic focus to the exchange of communications in the Straight Edge Discussion forum. Such a shift highlighted the communicative aspects of identity and norms and allowed me to analyze how a subculture emerged, rather than assuming its a priori existence. The project was not discourse analytic. I did not concentrate on the linguistic features of posts, but worked toward uncovering how social and social



psychological aspects of subculture and identity were expressed through interaction.

Data consisted of individual messages that were posted to the forum. Posts were organized into threads – series of posts based on a single topic. For example, at one point during the research I was interested in learning why some forum participants quit self-identifying as straightedge, yet continued to be active on the straightedge website. I started a new thread called, “When did you stop using the straightedge label?”, and posted a message asking participants to describe their reasons for not self-identifying. When participants logged on, they could see this new thread on my post within it. Participants could post responses to my question, ask questions in return, or make off-topic comments.<sup>9</sup> These kinds of activities occurred in many threads simultaneously, all of which comprised the forum. Thus the term “forum” refers not to the BBS system as a technological component of the website, but to the social space wherein participants conversed with each other.

Having identified posts as the unit of analysis, I define a post as a social act, the smallest unit of sociological analysis. These acts, when strung together in threads, each tied to a previous post, represent social interaction. This conceptualization is both a nominalist and interactionist approach (Warriner 1956), one that avoids imputing action to or reifying either the forum or the subculture. Muggleton (2000) takes the same approach to subculture, using Weber’s concept of methodological individualism to argue that “collectivities must be treated as *solely*

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<sup>9</sup> This last behavior, posting messages that did not relate to the thread topic, is called “tagging” and sometimes became a problem in threads where individuals with opposing viewpoints resorted to personal attacks and name-calling (called “flaming”). Moderators attempted in various ways to control both tagging and flaming, especially when other forum members posted complaints about such behavior. It was sometimes difficult for me to focus on the topic when having to scroll through multiple pages of posts that were laced with tags.

the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in the course of subjectively understandable action” (Weber 1968:13; cited in Muggleton 2000:23). A nominalist approach to studying subculture relies on the concept of the social and its relation to interpretation and meaning. By starting with the social act as being imbued with a subjective meaning that may or not be understood or agreed upon by other actors, we can see the Straight Edge Discussion forum, and the straightedge subculture as well, as “nothing more than shorthand” for the interactions of individuals (Muggleton 2000:23). Negotiation, conflict and change can therefore be anticipated in the analysis to come.

### Ethical considerations

Establishing the interpretive context of research meant recognizing three sources of my own interpretive knowledge. First, I had to consider my position within the research project. As a person who had self-identified as straightedge in the 1980s, I had my own opinion of what characterized straightedge. I had to consider my own biases to the extent that I was able. One way to control the interpretive process was to rely on other participants’ interpretations of posts in addition to my own. This second source of knowledge, the conversational context within which posts were embedded, was central in accurately portraying data. Third, I relied on past research to provide insight into straightedge subcultural dynamics.

My research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Departmental Institutional Review Board representative in May, 2002. The content analysis

portion posed no particular ethical concerns beyond those previously discussed regarding accurate representation of subjects' experiences. The second portion, participant observation, presented potential problems regarding the age of participants. Straightedge is a youth subculture and many of the participants are under the age of 18. Some threads started by participants would probe for users' face-to-face identities, asking where people lived, what school they attended, and so on. According to answers posted, about half of the respondents reported being minors. The solution was to avoid interacting directly in one-on-one conversation with these participants. My posts to the BBs Straight Edge Discussion forum were general in nature and were not directed at any particular participant or type of participant. Further, users who posted replies to my queries were not identifiable to me except for their username, which in most cases was a pseudonym and in no cases was a full name. There was no way possible for me to determine the face-to-face identity of participants, thus except in cases where participants made their age explicit, their status as 'minor' or 'adult' remained unknown to me, just as it did to other participants. As part of Institutional Review Board procedure, I created and distributed an informed consent form to individuals whom I directly contacted to gather data (See Appendix 1). Informed consent forms were distributed to all in-depth interviewees.

Many of the participants of the online forum knew that I was a researcher, though it was impossible to ensure that everyone knew. I made it clear in early posts to the BBS that I was a sociologist studying straightedge subculture, and thus was a person with multiple motives. That is, not only was I a person who shared similar beliefs about so-called healthy living with other forum participants, but I

was also a sociologist interested in the various ways that straightedgers staked out identity claims and worked towards subcultural maintenance. Before I began focused discussions or interviewing participants, I posted a message to the “Welcome” and “Straight Edge Discussion” forums stating that I was analyzing the textual conversations that people engaged in. I made it clear that I would change the usernames of all participants and not disclose the website’s address to help protect users’ online identities, thus ensuring that individual voices were protected to the fullest extent possible. I also invited anyone who wanted to know more about the research project or who did not want to be involved to contact me publicly or privately to discuss any problems or fears they might have or to opt out of being included in the research.

To ensure that participants understood what my research project was about, I typed a short description of my research plan and goals, which the website’s owner/ administrator pinned as a message at the top of the straightedge forum’s homepage. Anyone visiting the forum would see a message at the top of the main page entitled, “Do you know I am a researcher?” Some participants posted responses to this thread expressing their support for my project, and I made sure to keep track of new posts and to respond to them quickly. The “Do you know I am a researcher?” thread was viewed 413 times and there were a total of 26 posts. Additionally, I received four PMs from individuals about the research. Whether publicly or privately, nearly everyone who contacted me expressed excitement about the project and eagerness to be a part of the project. In one case an individual claimed s/he would only participate if I could assure that her/his cyber-identity

remain anonymous. Additionally, one person sent a private message asking to be excluded.

One final aspect of the research bears directly on participant anonymity. On April 8, 2003 the Straight Edge Discussion forum, as well as the other forums on the website, were closed and an updated version was opened. As the owner/administrator noted, the forum became very slow (or “laggy”) once too many posts were stored on the server. Opening a newer version of the forums achieved three goals. First, it allowed newer BBS tools to be implemented. Second, it enabled participants to access the forum in a more efficient manner (i.e., less lag). Third, people had to re-register as members and thus it helped to clear out the registry of members who no longer participated. The data analyzed comes from two earlier versions of the forum which exists now online. The earliest forum data has been deleted from Internet servers and now only exists as text files in my (and perhaps other people’s) personal computer. As of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, the second version of the forum is currently on the server, but it is not available on the worldwide web and only administrators have passworded access to it. The anonymity of participants is thus further protected because the data are no longer accessible to the public.

## CHAPTER 4

### Representing the characteristics of straightedge online

#### Introduction

In this chapter I develop a detailed portrait of the straightedge subculture in an online context through a descriptive analysis of the systems of norms and beliefs that structure the forum. To do this I analyze how subcultural space is organized on the website and what types of straightedge norms and symbols are visible. In the beginning of the chapter I describe how the website is organized physically and conceptually and how users navigate in it. I then provide a preliminary outline of straightedge norms based on analysis of thread roots from the Straight Edge Discussion forum.

The data presented in this chapter are used to answer Research Question 1: How does the website under investigation represent the characteristics of straightedge? I provide the reader with an overview of what the Internet site looks like, how it works, and how participants use it to build a representation of straightedge. Later, an analysis of posts will highlight some frequently discussed forum topics. This analysis relies on content analysis of the website, forum threads, and focused discussion data.

#### Navigating in straightedge subcultural cyberspace

After entering the website's homepage on the worldwide web, I immediately saw its name across the top of the screen surrounded by a pair of symbols with the

letters sXe (see Figure 4.1 below)<sup>10</sup>. Just below the webpage's name and the two symbols, there were twelve buttons that link to other web pages. They are entitled: Articles; Drug Effects; Forums; User Input; Clothes; Free Email; F.A.Q.; Tattoos; Projects; Links; Misc; Site Info. By running my cursor over each of the buttons, I could see that eleven of the buttons were linked to sub-pages of the website, while the twelfth was linked to a different website. These same twelve buttons appeared at the bottom of the page as well. Under the top buttons I was presented with a large skull and crossbones and the words "poison free." To the left of the skull and crossbones was what appeared to be an introduction to the website. It read:

For those of you new to straight edge, let me give you a basic run down on what straight edge is about. Straight edge has been referred to as a lot of things from a lifestyle, a personal choice, a philosophy, even a movement. This varies from person to person, but a few facts are solid. A person that claims to be straight edge does not consume recreational drugs (including alcohol and tobacco) and in most cases refrains from promiscuity. For more information read the FAQ and some of the articles.

This introduction provides a hint of the heterogeneity that exists within the subculture. The different definitions – lifestyle, personal choice, philosophy, and movement – are significant, as we will see in the next chapter. Further, the author provides her/his own interpretation by arguing that straightedgers "in most cases refrain from promiscuity." Going through each of the twelve links provided some useful information that helped frame the boundaries of the straightedge subculture



Figure 4.1 – Straightedge symbol

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<sup>10</sup> As I will discuss in greater detail later, this symbolizes the straightedge subculture: the symbol 'X' surrounded by the 's' and 'e' of Straight Edge.

online. Some of the links took me to relatively empty pages (that is, pages in development), but I will briefly comment on those pages that offered straightedge information to users.

- **Articles:** Here I found thirty sources relating to straightedge, including newspaper articles, television news transcripts, and personal essays. Many of the essays were not authored and offered outlines of straightedge values, norms and beliefs. A majority of the articles were positive portrayals of straightedge, and some offered explanations of extreme straightedge factions like hardliners and militants. There seemed to be an attempt by authors to portray a positive light on straightedge as a whole while marginalizing extreme versions of the subculture. By reading these articles, a guest might be surprised at how complex straightedge appears, with various interpretations of rules and different straightedge member types discussed.
- **Drug Effects:** A list of links to pages containing specific drug descriptions was given, including alcohol, marijuana, methamphetamine, ketamine, narcotics, inhalants, ecstasy, tobacco, hallucinogens, cocaine, and caffeine. A message at the top of the webpage told readers that each of the sub-pages represented an attempt to “present only scientific and medical facts.” By clicking on each drug name, I was taken to a new page that offered the drug’s chemical description, slang or street names, methods of use; short- and long-term physiological effects, and symptoms of intoxication. Although only “scientific” information was provided, there was no description of potential benefits that some of the listed drugs might possess.



- **User Input:** This page contained results from a few surveys completed by members and visitors of this and other websites, as well more than a dozen first-person accounts of either becoming or being straightedge. The material offered a variety of opinions regarding questions like, “why do people think drugs are so cool?” and “do you think drugs should be legalized?” The personal stories about straightedge related to reasons for becoming straightedge (e.g., overdose stories), and stories about how individuals were discriminated against because of their subcultural affiliation. Again, there seemed to be a narrow yet heterogeneous range of straightedge-related information. Drugs were described in negative terms, as were many of the people who used them.
- **Clothes and Tattoos:** These two links gave the reader a look at some f2f style aspects of the subculture. The clothing link gave me the opportunity to look at and/or mail-order straightedge shirts, sweatshirts, hats and bumper stickers in a variety of styles. The Tattoos section was added late during my research and was not yet functional when I completed the research project, but promised to offer images of straightedge-related tattoos and personal tattoos of straightedgers.
- **Links:** This page linked to other straightedge organizations, as well as to non-straightedge websites. There were only four active links, which included a German straightedge website, a vegan website, an anti-animal cruelty website, and an anti-pornography website. Thus, I was given some ideas about the range of activism in which straightedgers are involved. There was no commentary to accompany the links other than a title for each.

- F.A.Q.: This page of Frequently Asked Questions was perhaps most important to new straightedgers or those anticipating socialization into the subculture. Here one could find answers to some common straightedge-related questions. For example: what is straightedge; where did it come from; where did the name come from; what is the relationship between straightedge and politics, religion, or sexual orientation; why do straightedgers label themselves; how does one join the straight edge? The answers to these questions were relatively short and offered readers only a superficial response. Users who wanted more comprehensive answers to such questions were referred to the “Straight Edge & Stuff” bulletin board.

Together, these web pages provided a variety of types of information to visitors and participants alike. Scientific and medical information described the negative effects of drugs. First-person accounts of becoming straightedge provided potential common experiences between readers and authors. An F.A.Q. supplied newcomers with basic information about the subculture, and invited participants to the forums. Website users could find a variety of straightedge commodities and were promised more information as the website was regularly updated.

By clicking on the ‘Forums’ button, the BBS’s homepage appeared on the computer screen. Registered members could access the forums by either entering a username and password or by simply clicking on one of the forums listed. Visitors could become members of the forums by registering for a user name and password, but could also interact as much as they wanted with the username ‘Guest.’ Only rarely did I see a guest in the forums. In more than one instance I saw posts by guests who were claiming to want information about straightedge as part of a

school research project. Guests usually created a new thread and posted a question or a series of questions to which regular forum participants responded. I did not attempt to gather information about guests during this research, primarily because all guests shared the same user-identity and therefore there was no way of finding contact information for them unless they posted an email address or IM username in their post. Guests did not stay around as guests very long: either they registered for a username and became uniquely identifiable members of the forum or they received answers to their question(s) and left.

The BBs on the website's homepage were divided into several broad categories. Within each BB were several forums, listed by title and including a description. Between February and September 2001 the website hosted three BBs. When it crashed on September 17, 2001 and was subsequently rebuilt, the administrator re-organized the forums into four BBs. Figure 4.2 below shows two of the BBs and their forums in the first column: "Straight Edge & Stuff" had three forums and "General Forums" contained two. Of the other two BBs on the webpage, one was for political, religious and philosophical discussion and the other, entitled "Miscellaneous," hosted opinion polling, random musings and essays.

To enter the "Straight Edge Discussion" forum, I began by entering my username and password in the top right-hand corner, then clicking the 'Login' button. Once I had successfully logged in, the same screen reappeared, only the login option was replaced by my username and a 'Logout' button. From the welcome page (see Figure 4.2), I could click one of the underlined blue titles in the left column, each of which was linked to a forum. Figure 4.2 shows statistical data









<a href="#">REGISTER</a> <a href="#">FAQ</a> <a href="#">SEARCH</a> <a href="#">MEMBERS</a> <a href="#">TEAM</a> <a href="#">HOME</a>			
<b>» Welcome to Straight Edge Online Forums.</b> If this is your first visit to these forums, please read the <a href="#">FAQ - Frequently Asked Questions</a> . You must <a href="#">register</a> before you can post here: Please click on the Registration button above to register yourself. You don't need to register if you only want to read threads.			Login with Username & Password: <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Login"/>
<a href="#">Show Threads from the last 24h</a>		<a href="#">Mark all Forum as read</a>	
Forum	Content	Last Post	Moderator
<b>Straight Edge &amp; Stuff</b>			
 <a href="#">Welcome</a> New to the forums? Introduce yourself and get to know everyone!	351 Threads 6393 Posts	 <a href="#">&lt;poke&gt; ( [redacted] )</a> <b>Today, 08:32 AM</b>	<input type="text"/>
 <a href="#">Straight Edge Discussion</a> For the discussion of all things straight edge.	513 Threads 12995 Posts	 <a href="#">new sXe 'ers ( [redacted] )</a> <b>Today, 08:35 AM</b>	<input type="text"/>
 <a href="#">Vegetarianism/Veganism</a> Talk about your non animal induced lifestyles.	274 Threads 3294 Posts	 <a href="#">&lt;Witty comment about veg... ( [redacted] )</a> <b>Today, 08:37 AM</b>	<input type="text"/>
<b>General Forums</b>			
 <a href="#">General Discussion</a> For the discussion of anything and everything, and then some.	2424 Threads 71770 Posts	 <a href="#">dancing naked in the rain ( [redacted] )</a> <b>Today, 09:40 AM</b>	<input type="text"/>
 <a href="#">Music</a> If music be the lute of life... discuss!	972 Threads 12781 Posts	 <a href="#">throwdown ( [redacted] )</a> <b>Today, 09:19 AM</b>	<input type="text"/>

Figure 4.2 – Welcome page of the straightedge forums

that were updated in real time in the second column, including the number of threads and posts with each forum. A quick scan of the 4.2 also indicates that “General Discussion” was by far the most popular forum on the website with approximately 72,000 posts over a fourteen month period, while the “Straight Edge Discussion” and “Music” forums were competing closely for second position, each with approximately 13,000 posts [screenshot captured on November 21, 2002]. The number of posts was a better measure of activity than the number of threads because posts represented the lowest common denominator. Since my interest was focused on straightedge as a subcultural phenomenon, I decided to limit my analysis to the Straight Edge Discussion forum.

In the third column, “Last post,” I could see the last thread that was active in the forum as well as the username of the last contributor. The “Moderator” column showed who was responsible for moderating the discussion on each forum.<sup>11</sup> The names of the most recently active thread, last contributor, and moderator were all embedded links, which meant that I could click on the text and be transported either to the thread or to the user’s profile respectively (see Figure 4.3 below). From the User Profile page I could find out details about participants including statistics on their participation, contact information, personal/demographic information, and their avatar – a personal image that accompanied all their posts. All of this data was voluntarily provided by participants and was accessible to anyone visiting the straightedge forums. These data could be changed by users at any time and was password protected.

Inside the Straight Edge Discussion forum, I could click on threads to interact. By choosing a thread, I was able to read the statements, remarks or questions posed by the thread’s creator and other participants and could add my own ‘voice’ to the conversation if I chose. Those who did not want to add their voices to the thread could continue on to any other thread on the forum. I was identified by my username when I posted in a thread, and links to my email, IM and user profile were automatically provided. I could edit any post I made in the forum at a later, as could the forum’s administrator and moderator(s).

The forum provided a history of the conversations that took place in the public spaces of the BBS. It was also possible for users to send private messages to each

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<sup>11</sup> In screenshots, usernames are removed for anonymity. In extracts, usernames are changed to a pseudonym.

**Profile for patrick** User text

<b>Name:</b>	patrick
<b>Posts:</b>	285 (0.69 per day)
<b>Rank:</b>	Routinier
<b>Status:</b>	★★★
<b>Date Registered:</b>	10.02.2001

---

<b>ICQ Number:</b>	17080860
<b>AIM Screenname:</b>	X12treeX
<b>YIM Screenname:</b>	No declaration
<b>Email:</b>	<a href="mailto:patrick9@tennessee.edu">patrick9@tennessee.edu</a>
<b>Homepage:</b>	No declaration

---

<b>Sex:</b>	Male
<b>Birthday:</b>	No declaration
<b>Location:</b>	Hungary
<b>Interests:</b>	café racers, drums, mtn bikes
<b>Occupation:</b>	Sociologist

**Contact:** [Email](#) [PM](#) [Home](#) [Search](#)

Figure 4.3 – Example of a User Profile page

other. Private messages (PMs) between individuals are commonly known in synchronous chatting as ‘whispering’ (Jacobson 1996). These messages are similar to instant messages as only the recipient is alerted when a whisper is sent. Each time I logged on to the BBS, a message near the top of the webpage indicated the number of new PMs received. I could whisper by clicking the “PM” button from my Profile page (Figure 4.3) and then entering the recipient’s username, or I could click the username from within a thread. I rarely received PMs from other users, but occasionally someone would whisper when they agreed with a point I made in a thread or to thank me for taking her or his side in a heated debate. I occasionally

PMed other participants to ask for clarification on a point or to make private comments.

The Straight Edge Discussion forum was used for a variety of purposes by participants. To determine how the forum was used, I turned to the first message of every thread posted to the original Straight Edge Discussion forum between February 3, 2001 (when it opened) and September 17, 2001 (when it crashed). Specifically, I looked *only* at the title and the first message to see what topic or issue was being presented for discussion. For analytical clarity, I separate the first message in a thread from all subsequent messages by referring to the former as a “thread root” and to the latter as “posts.” My analysis of 285 thread roots using an emergent coding scheme resulted in a total of seventy-four codes arranged either freely or hierarchically within a node tree (see Appendix 3).

The first node I created, *Affiliation*, encapsulated discussions about how individual participants related to the straightedge subculture. There were a total of 176 thread roots or segments of thread roots coded to this node. The second node was *Rules* and contained discussions that made explicit reference to drugs and/or sex in some way. There were 174 thread roots or segments of thread roots coded to this node. The third node, *Style*, encompassed discussions about tattoos and piercings, clothing, and straightedge symbols. Forty-five thread roots were coded to the *Style* node. *Music* was the fourth node and was comprised of 39 thread roots. The last first-level node was *Internet* and contained thread roots or segments of thread roots related in some way to the Internet. Fifteen posts were coded to this node. Additionally there were sixteen free nodes. These were topics that did not seem to fit easily into the five branches of the node tree. There were a total of 132

thread roots or segments of thread roots coded to various free nodes, including *Member geography, Family and friends, and Stories*.<sup>12</sup> In the next section I discuss the rules node to illustrate the main normative concerns of online participants. In subsequent chapters, I address affiliation, rules, style, music and the Internet more specifically.

### Mapping straightedge norms through rules

After perusing the threads in the Straight Edge Discussion forum I perceived that in many ways straightedgers online were writing about the same things now that I talked or thought about as a straightedger in the 1980s. There were discussions about music, illegal drugs, alcohol and cigarettes, peer pressure, and promiscuity. There were also discussions about things that were not salient issues when I self-identified as a straightedger – vegetarianism/veganism and animal rights, for example. A review of the straightedge literature shows that music along with a rejection of drugs, promiscuity, and (increasingly) animal products are key subcultural norms (Irwin 1999; Pileggi 1998; Wood 1999). Research also indicates that religion has emerged as a cohesive bond within certain straightedge scenes (Tyler 1997; Wood 1999b).

Soon after MacKaye wrote the words to *Out of Step* (Minor Threat 1981b), he realized that they were being taken by many fans as rules to be followed (Berwick, N.d.). This was not what MacKaye intended, and he went so far as to add the following into a second recording of the song *Out of step*. “This is no set of rules.

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<sup>12</sup> The node tree in Appendix 3 does not match the description I just gave because the tree was continuously expanded and reorganized during the project. Only the final version is listed in the Appendix.



I'm not telling you what to do, all I'm pointing out are these three things that are, like, so important to the world, that I just don't find much importance in..." (Minor Threat, 1981b). Nevertheless, in the analysis that follows it will become clear that some respondents have interpreted straightedge as a set of rules. The rules from the song seemed to be what many participants thought about when defining their individual frame of reference.

Rather than take past research about straightedge norms as accurate, I wanted to find out what straightedgers themselves were writing about in their online conversations. In order to find the boundaries of this online case, I created a first-order node called *Rules* to encapsulate the norms discussed by participants. I use the term *Rules* to describe these norms because this was the word that they themselves sometimes used to describe their normative belief structures.<sup>13</sup> There were several threads that included the word rule in the title, such as "RULES OF SXE" and "One rule I need to know." Other participants articulated the idea by asking, "if i really do love my partner, is it ok in the sxe rules to have sex with her?" and "people seem to be tagging new rules to the movement everyday." These posts suggested to me that rule was an appropriate analytic term. Rules seemed to cluster around three issues: drugs, sex, and animal rights. Within each of these second-level nodes, there were a variety of third- and even fourth-level issues that participants discussed.

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<sup>13</sup> Linking norms to rules, I follow George Homans' (1961) definition of norms as "statement[s] made by members of a group, not necessarily by all of them, that its members ought to behave a certain way" (p. 40).

## *No drugs*

'No drugs' was the most-often discussed rule in the forum's thread roots. Out of 285 threads, forty-nine were created to discuss some aspect of drugs. Within the *drugs* node, alcohol was mentioned in eleven thread roots, caffeine was referred to in ten thread roots, prescribed and over-the-counter (OTC) medications in seven thread roots, and cigarettes in five thread roots. Marijuana, Ecstasy, and drug informants (or "narcs") were each brought up in two or less thread roots. Other unnamed drugs were mentioned in an additional eleven thread roots. Sometimes threads were established for participants to share their experiences living in opposition to a youth culture that celebrated drug use. In the following extract, a poster described his protest of "4/20" day at her/his local high school:

1 +---Topic: 4/20 Protest  
Posted by: jiel on [April 2001]  
Well, hmmm I survived the day after many threats and our school trying to cover it up. But anyways... i did my part of protesting 4/20 by wearing my DARE shirt drawing large X's on my hand. sXe Rules!<sup>14</sup>

In Extract (1), jiel considered an everyday activity such as going to school to be problematic ("I survived the day after many threats"). 4/20 refers to April 20<sup>th</sup>, a national day of celebration among drug users in the US.<sup>15</sup> For her/him, being straightedge on such a day meant being different than students who celebrated. In

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<sup>14</sup> Extracts taken from the forum are usually block quoted, though I sometime incorporate quoted phrases into sentences. Because the forum crashed and was rebuilt, the actually date/time of earlier posts was unavailable. In such cases, I note the month in brackets. Spelling and grammar are not changed in the extracts.

<sup>15</sup> The reason behind the growth of 4/20 is difficult to ascertain and there are conflicting stories. Some incorrectly believe it is a police dispatch code for "marijuana smoking in progress." Others argue it is to celebrate Bob Marley's birthday. See <http://www.health.org/reality/articles/2001/420.asp> for more versions of 4/20's origin myth.

other thread roots participants similarly established clear boundaries between themselves and people who engaged in or celebrated drug usage.

2 +---Topic: XTC

Posted by: 847jeff on [April 2001]

i think it's stupid.. why would someone wanna do something that literally puts holes in ur head

The suggestion was that Ecstasy (“XTC” in the thread’s title) was a dangerous drug that could “put holes in your head.” But illegal drugs were not the only drugs that straightedgers focused on:

3 +---Topic: useless facts

Posted by: 847jeff on [May 2001]

The 1st owner of the Marlboro company died of lung cancer.

Noting that the first owner of Marlboro died of lung cancer served to categorize cigarette users as destined to die because of their drug habit. Straightedgers, who by subcultural definition did not smoke, thus constructed identities in contrast to cigarette users. Posts such as these established a social space within which other straightedgers could share their opinions regarding various drugs without the negative reactions they might expect to face from non-straightedge peers. In many thread roots, straightedge was represented as an alternative and better way of living.

### *No sex*

Sex was another rule that was often discussed in thread roots. Minor Threat’s vocalist Ian MacKaye did not make things very clear when he wrote the words “don’t fuck” in *Out of step* (Minor Threat 1981b). As one participant shyly remarked:

4 +---Topic: I'm not really comprehending

Posted by: EmaJane [August 2001]

I feel like a real ass asking this, but here goes... I'm not really understanding the beliefs of being straight edge.... I get the substances part of your beliefs.... Its the sexual part of sXe that is getting me...

The discussions online reflected the ambiguity of MacKaye's song and the above thread root. Twenty-eight threads were established to discuss some aspect of sexual activity. Promiscuity was mentioned most often – in six thread roots. Pornography was brought up in five thread roots and pre-marital sex in four thread roots. Oral sex and alternative sexualities were established as discussion topics in one thread each.

Reasons for not engaging in (promiscuous) sexual activity were provided on the one hand by those who had been previously active sexually:

5 +---Topic: Why are you straight edge?  
Posted by: Bob Maslow on [September 2001]  
I don't fuck around because I tried that road once... and I ended up miserable and alone, and I'm not going to do that to my body and my mind.

At the same time virgin straightedgers stated their opinions about why they chose not to have sex:

6 +---Topic: I'm not really comprehending  
Posted by: Xnemo44X on [August 2001]  
i am most definately still a virgin, but when my significant other and i are ready-who knows. i just believe that it cant be meaningless. in order for me to have sex with someone im going to have to have been/ be with that person for a long time. i mean really long time.

Participants' posts about sex seemed to be couched in a desire for meaningful intimate relationships. The first poster above mentioned not having sex now because of the psychological and emotional pain resulting from her/his lack of meaningful sexual activity in the past. In Extract (6), the poster seemed to be a person who did not want to “try that road;” that is, someone who preferred to include sex only as part of a intimate and serious relationship.

Participants expressed various degrees of peer pressure when it came to sexual activity. I asked one forum participant what she thought about the sex rule:

**Patrick:** do you think a lot of people aren't as 'true to the edge' as they'd like to be?

**Nori Aoki:** Absolutely! It's a pretty impossible standard, when you get down to it. [...] Consider, for a moment, what the general age range is. 14-24, right? that's the time when your hormones go nuts. I've BEEN there. and part of the ethic is about sexual safety. that's the part that's the hardest, I think. The 'no promiscuous sex' goes right against what nature is saying at that time of life.

**Patrick:** do you think some people claim more for the 'sex' part and less for the 'drugs' and vice versa,...?

**Nori Aoki:** So you're holding yourself up to a standard that you physically almost CAN'T meet. I'd have to say that most of the sXers I know hold for the drugs, more than anything else. that's the part that concerns them most

**Patrick:** i've heard people say that you claim edge if you're too ugly to get laid..... what about that?

**Nori Aoki:** THAT's absurd. Edge is something inside you. It's not something you use an excuse for why you don't get any ... and if you use it like that, you're not REALLY edge.

Nori Aoki emphasized that by affiliating with promoted straightedge rules, individuals faced challenges sexually and socially. It is during youth that one's sexuality becomes an important component of personal identity, and becoming a straightedger meant taking a stand against what might be considered natural and desirable (Carpenter 2001). For Nori Aoki, Xnemo44X and others, straightedge was an important personal commitment that transcended peer pressures and demanded that individuals claim Edge for the "right reasons." Yet 'no sex' was seen as perhaps the hardest rule to follow, not only because of the ambiguity with which it was incorporated into the straightedge philosophy, but also because of the 'unnaturalness' of avoiding sex as a youth.

### *Animal rights*

A third normative topic or rule discussed online was animal rights. This rule was discussed less in the Straight Edge Discussion forum than the other two and with good reason – it had its own separate forum (see Figure 4.2). In keeping with my focus on discussions about straightedge, I analyzed only those threads about animal rights that were included in the Straight Edge Discussion forum. Within the *Animal rights* node, I coded two second-level nodes: *Veganism* and *Vegetarianism*. Three thread roots were coded generally as *Animal rights*, while *Vegetarianism* was mentioned in two thread roots, and *Veganism* was mentioned in eight thread roots.

In his study of straightedge music, Robert Wood argues that “into the 1990s, music lyrics indicate that straightedge youth increasingly opposed animal exploitation in all of its perceived forms” and that these themes “at least partially comprised a straightedge ideology or conceptual frame of reference” (1999b:139, 140). Similarly, Darrell Irwin claims that “vegetarianism (the prohibition of the ingestion of any meat or animal product) and animal rights have all been embraced by Straight Edge adherents” and “the vegetarian lifestyle has come to be a defining feature of Straight Edge” (Irwin 1999: 373).<sup>16</sup> Review of the *Animal Rights* node suggested to me that animal rights, including vegetarianism and veganism, were not considered a straightedge rule by many online forum participants.

7 +---Topic: Vegan

Posted by: SE4L on [August 2001]

Hey ppl who are Vegans, why would someone want to become a Vegan? What would cause someone to become Vegan. Needless to say: I'm not. I can't live w/o

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<sup>16</sup> I question Irwin's definition of vegetarianism. Ovo-lacto vegetarianism (the most popular form in the US) excludes meat products from one's diet, while dairy products and eggs are still regularly consumed. Veganism, on the other hand, excludes all meat and animal products from one's lifestyle, including dairy products, products that come from animals in captivity (e.g. eggs), and by-products made in whole or part from animals (e.g. leather, fur).

meat. No disrespect intended here, it's just out of sheer curiosity. Thx. alot for all replies

Here a straightedge forum participant questioned the vegan lifestyle. S/He claimed that there was no animosity or “disrespect” meant in the thread root, rather s/he wanted to start a discussion among vegan, and non-vegan straightedgers.

Vegetarian participants also offered information to non-vegetarian straightedgers, as the following thread root demonstrates:

- 8 +---Topic: Any sxe's not vegies? read this  
Posted by: HCDude on [July 2001]  
Well, If your not one yet i have a suggestion for you. Go rent the movie "Faces of death". It is a strong movie about violence, death, and has alot of featured stuff on animal slaughtering. I was so angry after seeing it for the first time. At first i hated my goverment and most of all i hated the companys that support this. Also check out Peta.com for more info on animal rights and how you can do shit about it. Enjoy.

Vegans, vegetarians, and non-vegetarian participants discussed in several threads the relative ethics of meat-eating versus veganism. Rather than discuss vegetarianism/veganism as a part of straightedge, participants regularly articulated separate vegetarian and straightedge identities.

- 9 +---Topic: If Vegans sound preachy  
Posted by: Billy D on [May 2001]  
I seem to of offended some people when I've had trouble expressing the fact I'm vegan. To me it's just part of me. I was vegan before I was straightedge and I was veggie much longer before that. I've mentioned it in a couple of posting latlely and it's been taken wrong by at least one person each time. I'm sorry if it sounds like I think I'm better than anyone cos belive me I don't think that- and I don't want people jumping to that conclusion.

In Extract (9), Billy D claimed that he was vegetarian before becoming vegan or straightedge. There was no suggestion that straightedge and vegetarianism were connected. Rather, for Billy D veganism “is just a part of me.” Posts such as this one, combined with the fact that there was a separate forum entitled

‘Vegetarianism/Veganism,’ leads me to suggest that, while many straightedgers professed practicing meat- or animal-free lifestyles, it would be inappropriate to encapsulate them as generally agreed on components of the straightedge subculture.

Thread roots demonstrate types of normative topics that regularly surfaced in the online forum. In line with other reports of straightedge subcultural norms, participants spent considerable time and energy in the forum discussing them. The thread roots above provided a limited view of norms because they only represented what the thread’s originator had to say. My goal was to describe the types of topics most-often discussed in the forum. The ways online participants discussed these norms and the variety of positions that individuals assumed suggested that straightedge norms were flexible. Participants had substantial diversity of opinions as to the meanings of “no drugs” and “no sex,” and how these norms should be interpreted and utilized in daily life. I devote Chapter 7 to a discussion of the ambiguity and contestation of straightedge norms and beliefs.

### Summary

This chapter provided a preliminary analysis of the straightedge subculture online, with specific focus on two aspects. First, I provided a technical map of the straightedge website and forum to illustrate the types of subcultural information available to website users. Second, I analyzed 285 thread roots from the “Straight Edge Discussion” forum to determine the most frequently discussed topics. The data have illuminated some characteristics of the straightedge subculture, as communicated among forum participants. In the next chapter I consider how



forum participants express identity through style-displays, affiliation, and the textual construction of subcultural boundaries.

## CHAPTER 5

### Style-displays, identities, and boundaries online

#### Introduction

In her ethnographic analysis of a Southwestern punk subculture scene, Fox (1987) interviewed hardcore participants and found that the scene was hierarchically comprised of four member types. “Hardcore” participants envisioned themselves as ideologically true punks. They lived punk in many ways, such as dropping out of high school, not working, running away from home, and using drugs. “Softcore” participants considered punk to be an attractive lifestyle but not a life-changing ideology. They reported seeing themselves also as authentic punks but were viewed by hardcore punks as merely acting rather than being punk. They dressed and acted like hardcore punks in public, but treated punk as a temporary identity. “Preppie punks” enjoyed the deviant aspects of a punk identity but reported not being willing to give up their typically middle-class social positions. They dressed like punks on the weekends, but were seen as poseurs by hardcore and softcore constituents. “Spectators,” the most peripheral member type, enjoyed participating in certain aspects of the local punk community, such as going to punk music concerts. However, they did not attempt to follow punk ideology nor style. Fox analyzed the different levels of punkness with the concept of commitment, which she measured through behaviors that reflect punk ideologies or “beliefs” (Fox 1987:345). I follow a similar approach as I explore how individuals within the Straight Edge Discussion forum affiliate with straightedge by linking commitment to expressions of subcultural beliefs.

This chapter seeks to answer Research Question 2: What can research on a straightedge Internet site reveal about how Internet users express processes of subcultural style, affiliation, and boundaries? I demonstrate how straightedgers express identity through the forum and provide an analysis of three aspects of identity – displays of subcultural style, strategies of subcultural affiliation, and the construction of subcultural boundaries. My focus is on how each of these aspects is achieved through textual interaction. I rely on content analysis, focused discussions, and in-depth interview data throughout the chapter.

### Subcultural style-displays<sup>17</sup>

In his classic analysis of punk style, Dick Hebdige (1979) noted that subculturalists appropriate cultural objects from the mainstream and reshape their meanings to fit the subculture's position relative to mainstream culture. This process, called bricolage<sup>18</sup> (see also Clarke 1976b), was identified previously in analyses of what may be the most distinguishing and enduring sign within the straightedge subculture: the 'X' (Irwin 1999; Wood 2001). In an interview with Beth Lahickey (1998), Minor Threat's vocalist 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 D.C. 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

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<sup>17</sup> A version of this section has been accepted for publication (Williams 2003).

<sup>18</sup> See Muggleton (2000) for a recent and in-depth discussion of bricolage. He defines bricolage as, "to rearrange and customize items of clothing, attaching their own meanings to the new constructs" (p. 54n6).

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 D.C. had to deal with just to see music, to be free. (In Lahickey 1998:99)

While originally the 'X' was used by club and bar owners to differentiate legal from underage customers to regulate the sale of alcohol, straight punks appropriated the sign and imbued it with the meaning of youth. The 'X' was displayed as cover art on punk album covers as early as 1980 (see Figure 5.1 below).

The 'X's meaning was subsequently carried beyond this original subcultural appropriation to signify the straightedge subculture itself. It was popularized by straightedge bands and fans in the 1980s and 1990s, and is found on music recording covers, patched or painted onto book bags and backpacks, and tattooed on the skin (Atkinson 2003). The 'X' is worn at school and in other public places as a symbol of subcultural affiliation. In Chapter 4, Extract (1) in which a high schooler reported wearing 'X's to school. S/He used the 'X' to affiliate with straightedge, thereby creating a categorical distinction between her/himself and the mainstream school population, which included not only other students, but also adult administrators. In the following post, MeanBug describes how her/his 'X's



Figure 5.1 – Teen Idles' LP *Minor Disturbance*

act as a subcultural marker that represent a subcultural identity.

- 1 +---Topic: Do you wear X's started by xXxLINxXx  
Posted by: MeanBug on [April 2001]  
Do you wear X's 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 every1 else?

The 'X' is arguably the most common visual representation of f2f straightedge identity and was similarly used by participants online. Notice the username of the participant who started the thread in Extract (1) above: xXxLINxXx. The username was embedded within a pair of triple-'X's. Upon beginning this case study I realized that some participants displayed aspects of their straightedge identities online through stylistic means such as this. Other newcomers noted it as well.

- 2 +---Topic: The "x"  
Posted by: XxbrittanyxX on [May 2001]  
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 x's on your name?"

Like the 'X' drawn on straightedgers' bodies or belongings, many forum participants expressed a straightedge identity by placing their usernames inside Xs.

Straightedgers alternatively used either one, two or three Xs online, though I was unable to determine any more than stylistic preferences between them. The 'X' served as an immediate marker to other participants that the poster of a particular message self-identified as a straightedger. Similar to the 'X,' 'sXe' represented straightedge, with the 'S' from 'straight' and the 'E' from 'edge' surrounding the 'X.' Participants reported that it was pronounced "sexy."

Participants also regularly chose usernames that carried personal or collective identity markers beyond the use of the 'X'. Usernames are important because they represent the first choice new members make as participants in the forum (Talamo

and Ligorio 2001). Once I decided to register and become a member of the forum, I had to first choose a username that would identify me. XpatrickX or xXpatrickxXx were potential ways in which I could have expressed my affiliation to straightedge on the forum. I chose to only use my first name to avoid explicit affiliation.

In a *focused discussion* as well as another thread on the topic of usernames, a majority of participants reported relying on their birth name or some derivative thereof for their usernames. Some relied only on their first or last name, while other participants' birth names were combined with other aspects of subcultural identity, either spelled out ('Punk Rock Bob) or enclosed with Xs ('XstanleyX'). Others chose usernames that related to central aspects of social identities, such as the subcultural usernames 'XiamstraightedgeX,' 'XpunkgrrlX,' 'XHardlineGrrlX' and 'XpoisonfreeX,' the ethnic username 'sXe\_chicana,' the vegan usernames 'XmeatlessX' and 'XVTveganX,' and the religious usernames 'XCHRISTIANX' and 'XmonkX'. Some created usernames that reflected aspects of personal identity, such as 'XopenXmindedX' and 'xscreamingemotionsx.' Finally, participants reported choosing usernames associated with leisure activities, from various media (e.g., TV series, comic books), from a favorite song or music band, and from mythological sources.

In addition to choosing personalized usernames, two other forms of display were readily apparent to me - avatars<sup>19</sup> and signature files (sig.files). Other cyber-

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<sup>19</sup> The world avatar comes from Indian culture and means 'reincarnation.' It refers to a god called Visnú who was able to reincarnate himself through several different faces. On the Internet the word avatar is used to describe the 'object' representing the user - it is typically a photo, design, picture, or animation (Talamo and Ligorio, 2001: 110).

researchers have noted the importance of understanding how these tools are used to contextualize identity claims and to make certain aspects of personal and social identity salient (Schleef 1996; Talamo and Ligorio 2001; Travers 2000). Like participants' usernames, avatars and sig.files accompanied every post made in a forum thread. The more active participants were, the more often aspects of their identity were projected into the forum.

Users regularly developed sig.files that provided information about their subcultural affiliation and served to communicate subcultural resistance to mainstream culture. 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. I sent PMs to participants whose sig.files I found interesting and asked them to describe what they meant to them. Participants tended to make statements about resistance in one of two ways. Some sig.files represented a passive or non-violent stance towards non-straightedgers:

3 x living well is the best revenge x

4 ~When All The World Has Fallen Down Around Me, I Know My Beliefs  
Will Keep Me Standing~

5 never have, never will. long live sXe.

In the first sig.file above, straightedge (made explicit by the 'X's which enclosed the quotation) represented a reaction to mainstream culture. Straightedgers believe in "living well" by steering clear of certain social behaviors, 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 Extract (4) straightedge was raised to a position above mainstream culture through emphasizing that strong beliefs would lead to success (“my beliefs will keep me strong”) in comparison with the problems likely to confront non-straightedgers (“When All The World Has Fallen Down”). Resistance took the form of subcultural beliefs that would protect against a failing mainstream culture. Extract (5) focused on the centrality of straightedge subcultural norms for daily life. The sig.file’s author proudly displayed her/his life-long commitment to rejecting mainstream cultural expectations (“never have, never will”), the specifics of which were taken for granted, while explicitly supporting an alternative, subcultural frame (“long live sXe”). Extracts (4) and (6) can be interpreted as contrasting either drug using participants in other subcultures, such as punk, or a permissive mainstream youth culture. Extract (5) appeared focused more specifically at mainstream culture.

At the same time, other sig.files displayed more dramatic stances against not only mainstream culture, but towards radical versions of the straightedge subculture. In the next three extracts, resistance was displayed more aggressively:

6 I wasn't born with enough middle fingers

7 i just can't tolerate all the shit i see

8 THUGS NOT DRUGS  
I carve X's into people's backs



In Extract (6), the participant identified her/himself as someone who took a public stand (displaying 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 behavior that s/he rejected. The middle finger served as a poignant and confrontational (yet non-violent) way to express rejection of mainstream cultural norms. Extract (7) above 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 very outspoken form of resistance toward non-straightedge behaviors. However, its author reported intending it as a declaration of disgust at school peers’ drug-related behaviors, rather than as a plan for militant reaction.

The idea behind the third sig.file (Extract 8), “thugs not drugs,” appeared at first as a call to straightedgers to unite and actively oppose drug use (“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 referred to the 1995 slashing of an ‘X’ by Salt Lake City, USA straightedgers into a youth’s back for smoking marijuana (Lee-Shanok 1997), which was regularly mentioned by forum participants and appeared to be common knowledge. It was impossible to tell 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, as both militant and non-militant straightedgers frequented the online forum. When I sent a PM 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 [forum] with ‘hugs not drugs’ and someone with ‘pugs not drugs.’ no real deep meaning. i was just being a jackass. “i carve x's 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 was 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 action against non-straightedgers.

Different readers doubtless took away various interpretation of signature files’ meanings. Sig.files were potentially powerful messages within the subcultural site because they accompanied every post made by its author. Sig.files were particularly visible if their owners were frequent posters in the forum. Some participants periodically changed their sig.files much like many people change their own email sig.files – when they found a new quote that interested them or when someone wrote or said something that caught their eye.

Avatars were used by a majority of participants in the forum. The BBS’s parameters allowed for a 100 x 100-pixel image to be inserted in a user’s preference window (see Figure 4.3). Some of the more technologically-proficient users inserted small animated sequences instead of static images. Like the participant’s username and sig.file, the avatar accompanied all her posts and thus helped other participants to form impressions of the poster’s identity. Many users changed their avatars regularly during my research, including me. I would change mine occasionally on a whim or when I got tired of looking at it as I reviewed various threads in which I had participated. Some users inserted pictures of themselves; others inserted pictures of a band or celebrity; still others inserted

messages or logos. Some avatars seemed more negative in nature (such as three 'X's with animated flames), while others were humorous (e.g., an image of David Hasselhoff on the set of *Baywatch*, Mr. T, or Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*). When taken together, usernames, sig.files and avatars provided insight into how style was used to define subcultural identity. More information about the expression of subcultural identity was gained by studying how participants wrote about their affiliation with straightedge.

#### Affiliating online: individual and social identities

One view of the relationship between a subculture and its constituency is the means through which subcultural affiliation is expressed. As mentioned in Chapter 3, affiliation refers to how individuals become more closely connected or associated with the straightedge subculture, either through roles or categories, and is thus a manifestation of a subcultural identity. The straightedge subculture exists for its participants as a set of experiences and behaviors that are located within a constellation of norms and beliefs about themselves and others. Approaching straightedge in this way allows for a discussion of the various forms of relationships participants expressed having with straightedge as a normative structure, with other straightedgers, and with mainstream and drug cultures. How participants wrote about the straightedge subculture was diverse, but can be analyzed according to Thoits and Virshup's (1997) distinction between individual "identification of the self *as* a certain kind of person" and social "identifications of the self *with* a group or category as a whole" (p. 106).

Participants tended to write about straightedge either as a personal philosophy

or as some sort of organized social group, reflecting two early approaches found in straightedge music lyrics. Washington DC's Minor Threat, who coined the term, told listeners that straightedge was not a set of rules (see note 26). Nevada's Seven Seconds, on the other hand, expressed through songs like "The Kids Are United" and "Definite Choice" the idea of a youth movement dedicated to positive collective action (Seven Seconds 1984a, 1984b). These two bands were not antagonistic towards each other and represent two complementary aspects of straightedge identity, which were also reflected in posts in the Straight Edge Discussion forum.

Some participants presented an individual identity in the forum. They saw straightedge as a personal philosophy for living or as a part of their core self. Other participants expressed straightedge as a tightly knitted group of like-minded individuals involved in something that approached a social movement. Some participants wrote about straightedge in both individual and social terms. The following thread provides an example of how both individual and social identity were expressed in the forum.

9 +---Topic: I'm not really comprehending

Posted by: EmaJane on [August 2001]

I'm not really understanding the beliefs of being straight edge.... [...] As far as accepting and taking on the sXe lifestyle how do I go about it..?? I understand that there isn't any initiation or this little organization you join... As for a sXe scene around where I live there basically isn't one at least not to my knowledge... And in just all honesty I have never even meet anyone who claims to be remotely straight edge much less know what straight edge is....

Posted by: JohnPublic on [August 2001]

EmaJane, Straight Edge is somewhat variable from person to person. The basic rules are no drugs, no alcohol, and no "promiscuous sex." [...] As far as people being straight edge, there are more then you think and more then they think. They are "lots" of people who live the Straight Edge life style, they just don't realize it.

In Extract (9) EmaJane questioned the meaning of straightedge, which s/he

appeared to understand as being both a lifestyle and a social group. S/He acknowledged that straightedge did not have a set of initiation rites or other rituals consistent with an organizational subculture and noted there is not “an organization you join.” Rather s/he initially wrote about “accepting and taking on the sXe lifestyle.” Yet, at the same time s/he drew attention to the straightedge “scene” by noting that “where I live there basically isn’t one.”<sup>20</sup> EmaJane stated that there was no local scene where s/he lived, and perhaps used the forum specifically to interact with other subcultural participants in lieu of f2f communication. EmaJane apparently viewed straightedge in role-related terms by asking how to correctly assume a straightedge identity, thereby implying the existence of a normative structure.

Straightedge did not provide a rigid normative framework; rather, how individuals interpreted the frame was open. JohnPublic responded to EmaJane by giving his opinion that straightedge was “somewhat variable from person to person.” Further, s/he stated that there were “lots” of people who could be considered straightedge but “they just don’t realize it.” JohnPublic seemed to assert that anyone who lived according to straightedge tenets could be considered straightedge regardless of any categorical affiliation with the subculture. In this way, straightedge was expressed by JohnPublic as a categorical phenomenon that was definable according to peoples’ thoughts and behaviors, rather than by identifying oneself in terms of a role

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 6 for a discussion of ‘scene.’ For now, let it suffice to say that scene refers to a localized subcultural field manifested through interaction between individuals. It has been defined elsewhere as “self-consciously ‘alternative’ publications, bands, show, radio stations,...and people” (Duncombe, 1997: 52-53; cited in Pileggi, 1998: 111).

Comments that expressed an individual identity could be seen most clearly in discussions about self-identifying as a straightedger. In everyday language on the forum, participants used the verb “to label” to describe the act of identifying oneself or another. In separate focused discussions about claiming versus rejecting straightedge identity, two posters wrote:

10 +---Topic: a sxe researcher

From Ethical Underground on 11.06.2002, 09:30 AM:

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 dont claim the label. i dont 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.

11 +---Topic: WhEn DiD YoU qUiT uSiNg ThE lAbEl StRaIgHtEdGe?

From TerryMango on 11.04.2002, 10:31 PM:

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 its not a group, it is about my life and my future.

In Extracts (10-11), Ethical Underground and TerryMango both appeared to believe that following straightedge tenets was an expression of the individual self. In Extract (10), Ethical Underground separated the straightedge label from her/his individual identity – the label seemed to be something trendy, with “kids trying to be as ‘edge’ and ‘hardcore’ as possible.” Ethical Underground stated that he did not use the straightedge label because straightedge was a part of him, while the label was a merely a form of ‘doing’ straightedge (Widdicombe 1998a; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990). Likewise, TerryMango claimed in Extract (11) that, while for some youth straightedge was a label that indicated affiliation with a category, for her/him it is about “my life and my future.” TerryMango wrote about straightedge as an individual rather than a categorical identity, and even highlighted his awareness of the inappropriateness of the term “group” by placing it in quotations.

In the following post, Bob Maslow rejects the idea of claiming straightedge to be accepted by others. For him, straightedge is all about doing what was best for oneself and not worrying about other people.

12 +---Topic: Why are you straight edge?

Posted by: Bob Maslow on [September 2001]

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... ie, "how many people can I sleep with without it being 'promiscuous?'" And 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.

Bob Maslow described both individual and social identities, but made clear which he believed was correct. For him, straightedge was an individualistic experience. Following rules in ritualistic fashion was seen as a way for participants to highlight their shared similarity with other forum participants, which was a shallow or inauthentic reason for claiming a straightedge identity. By internalizing straightedge's normative framework as an individualistic philosophy, Bob Maslow tried to avoid categorization and thereby avoid some inauthentic reasons for subcultural affiliation ("just does what someone else tells them to do"; "asking permission to do something with your body"). Expressing the individual aspects of identity ("I have my own reasons for being 'straight edge'") also highlighted the freedom of the individual from peer pressure – an ideology deeply embedded in punk subculture.

Participants took different approaches to reconciling the problem of subscribing to subcultural norms while trying to appear neither trendy (just claiming a label)

nor shallow (just following rules). Ethical Underground (Extract 10) did not use the straightedge label to define himself because, once he internalized its symbolic value at an individualistic level, categorical affiliation became irrelevant. He claimed elsewhere that it had been a hassle for him to constantly explain the meaning of straightedge to non-straightedgers. He found it easier to simply call himself drug free rather than straightedge presumably because drug free encapsulated the same basic ideology, stated with less ambiguity his opinion about drugs, and avoided the additional symbolic baggage that straightedge (as a category) carried.<sup>21</sup>

Other participants also apparently had difficulty deciding whether categorical affiliation was worth having. Posts that highlighted the problematic meanings attached to the label straightedge bring aspects of social identity into focus. Forum participants expressed the categorical aspects of straightedge and how their subcultural selves were affected by claiming a category-based identity. As I was told during an interview, straightedge had been an important part of xHCgrrrlx's life for seven years, but the negative connotations associated with straightedge sometimes made categorical affiliation difficult during interaction with outsiders.

**Patrick:** you DO consider yourself a straightedger - right? i mean you self-identify as one.

**xHCgrrrlx:** yeah. i go on and off but right now i'm identifying as one. i don't

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<sup>21</sup> Some straightedgers in Salt Lake City (SLC), Utah developed a violent reputation that was spread through media coverage around the world. In 1995, SLC straightedgers were charged with slashing an 'X' in the back of a youth they found smoking marijuana. Two other SLC straightedgers were recently convicted of murder (Irvine, 2003). SLC straightedgers have also been linked to the burning of a McDonald's restaurant, convicted on weapons charges, destroying property and releasing animals at a mink farm, and have been placed on an FBI watch list for domestic terrorism (Cannon, 2000; Hall, 1998; Lee-Shanok, 1997; Sahagun, 1998). ABC's 20/20 did a special report in which straightedge was labeled a gang (for an unedited transcript go to: <http://members.tripod.com/~XthinkX/files/2020sxe.html>).



realllly like the label, you know? just cuz of all the bad connotations (slc gangs, etc...) but it's sooo convenient. [...] it's really frustrating because i've identified as edge for almost 7 years now and i still get grief over that, like people still think i'm hardline or something...either that or they think that as soon as i turn 21 i'm gonna become an alcoholic or whatever...

For her, straightedge social identity was problematic, yet the role was very meaningful personally. The problems associated with categorical affiliation were more than just negative media publicity, but included the many youth who self-identified as straightedge to be popular (see also Extract 10). While many participants wrote about their decision to be straightedge for life, they criticized other alleged straightedgers who “sold out” when they went away to college or reached legal drinking age. These individuals earned the labels “straightedge till college” or “straightedge till 21.”

Straightedge was expressed as an organization in some posts. In Extract (9), a participant expressed not being sure s/he were straightedge and asked online participants for validation of her/his social identity. The same is true in Extract (13).

13 +---Topic: AM I sXe?!

Posted by: sxesweets on [July 2001]

i think i am, but i wanna make sure...

no drugs, no drinking... and i'm a virgin FOR NOW... can i have sex and still be sXe? now i mean if i have sex, i'm not gonna be all whore-ish, i'll just have sex with the one person i love and that's all...and if we break up...i won't have sex till i'm married.... what do u think?!

sxesweets wanted to affiliate with straightedge but believed that s/he needed confirmation from other self-identifying straightedgers. Straightedge could be seen as having boundaries – potential members need to understand the nuances of rules if they wanted to be accepted. Extract (13) could thus be interpreted as a request for rule interpretation (“i wanna make sure [...] can i have sex and still be sXe?”).

Similar posts conveyed straightedge as a organization to be joined with a list of things to do and not to do that had to first be checked before being admitted.

My analysis up to now has suggested how some forum participants expressed an individual identity when discussing straightedge, while others expressed a social identity. My analytical distinction should not suggest that the two identities are mutually exclusive. Both individual and social identities represent parts of a subcultural identity. Those individuals who expressed their affiliation through a social identity already (and necessarily) affiliated with straightedge in an individual way. That is, they assumed a straightedge role, with its associated norms, when interacting in the forum. One merged view of social and individual identity sees individuals who share values, norms, and beliefs that mark them off as distinct categories. The analysis suggests that straightedge is expressed at the level of social identity (cf., Haenfler 2003) by only some participants, while others focused on individual identity. Thus, straightedge can be seen to hold importance as a form of social identity for some participants *in addition to* an individual identity. Looking at some further examples of posts that conveyed the importance of a social identity draws attention to how forum participants viewed outsiders.

### Degrees of exclusivity

Regardless of how participants affiliated with other forum participants, they appeared to see themselves as sharing some common attitudes about drugs and sex, though not necessarily a vision of how the world ought to be. Participants regularly wrote about straightedge as us versus them. I look at how straightedgers expressed

their opinions of non-straightedgers, i.e., drug-users and promiscuous individuals. Such messages were sometimes neutral towards outsiders and other times were antagonistic.

A segment of participants spoke about straightedge as a reactionary type of social movement – one in which straightedgers were waging a war against mainstream culture. This reactionary perspective was represented by hardliners – straightedgers who believed in taking a collective and active stance against drug use, promiscuity and the violation of animal rights. Hardliners, oftentimes represented in the media by Salt Lake City straightedgers, were understood alternatively as activists who advocated the use of force to defend their subcultural beliefs or as gang members, thugs and criminals. Below a hardliner opened a thread to defend the hardline position.

14 +---Topic: Why does everyone hate HARDLINE!?!

Posted by: Xwillingsacrificex on [June 2001]

I'm sick of all this anti-hardline shit. I used to be one of those guys that would say "#### hardline" and all that crap but I've realized that I'm pretty close to being hardline. I'm from Utah and there is kids with concrete beliefs which is good in my eyes because they are true to everything they do. I'm kind of getting sick of this crap as if SxE was a symbol of peace. We have to fight all the time out here with assholes always giving us a hard time then we get slag from other sxe scenes for being too violent and all that...Well I'm sick of it!

Xwillingsacrificex suggested that hardline was based on “concrete beliefs” and that hardliners remained true to their ideals (perhaps compared to the “straightedge till 21” individuals). He also suggested that outsiders’ actions led to reactions that other straightedgers criticized. Hardliners’ slogans, including “by any means necessary,” “no compromise,” and “our way or no way” suggested they believed rigid rules were required not only for straightedgers, but for all humankind. Protect, a straightedger from Italy, began a thread by stating her/his hardline opinions about

non-straightedgers.

15 +---Topic: S.E. COULD BE A VIOLENT MOVEMENT

Posted by: Protect on [July 2001]

Here in Italy, kids who smoke, drink and others things like that, should have a lesson!

Protect used the word “movement” in the thread’s title. S/He also seemed to support actions against non-straightedgers to give them “a lesson” about how one ought to live. Note also her/his username, with its military reference. Such analogies further characterized hardline straightedge as both a unified social force and as extremists that were committed to their beliefs and behaviors to the point of forcing others to submit to their prerogative.<sup>22</sup>

Not all participants agreed with the hardline view of outsiders. Some participants, especially those who reported having used drugs in the past or who had friends who used drugs, were more likely to hold more neutral attitudes towards drug users. In the following edited extract, we see how straightedge participants react to a post by subway, an admitted drug user who frequented the Straight Edge Discussion forum as he searched for reasons to become clean.

16 +---Topic: intelligent drug users

Posted by: subway on [August 2001]

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.

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<sup>22</sup> One forum participant offered a definition of ‘hardline.’ He said, “HARDLINE is not STRAIGHT EDGE there are massive differences. Hardline is vegan, pro life and no drugs, booze or sex. It involves violence. And militant Animal Rights action. Hardliners do not call themselves straight edge. They are their own unique subculture.” While this definition may be true for this particular participant in his own local area (somewhere in New Zealand), I found little supporting evidence from other forums participants. This and other subcultural terms were oftentimes interpreted differently by members of the forum. It is therefore necessary to highlight divergent interpretations within straightedge groups in order to avoid fixing terms that are fluid.

Posted by: xXxLINxXx on [August 2001]

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!

Posted by: xamalekx on [August 2001]

well subway. i still stand by my general disliking of drug users. are there more intelligent/accpeting ones than there are mindless stupid sheep? if so, then i welcome them with open arms.

Posted by: alaric on [August 2001]

I have nothing against drug users - its 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.

In the above thread we see three responses to subway's query regarding how straightedgers "feel about drug users." subway first claimed a shared categorical identity by having "been accepted into this lovely establishment," and the statement that his "feelings towards straight edge kids has changed for the better" set the tone for supportive replies. In each case in Extract (16), however, straightedge participants described a "general disliking of drug users," thereby rejecting subway's claim to similarity. xXxLINxXx claimed that she had never "met" a drug user (besides subway perhaps) that she "would like to have a conversation with." Another poster, alaric, took the moral high ground by relieving herself of the responsibility for caring about drug users ("its your life, not mine"). Drug users were to be kept "at arms length" from straightedgers because their behaviors were emotionally destructive. Straightedgers expressed relatively unsympathetic attitudes toward drug-users, who were constructed as an out-group and negatively referenced (e.g., "mindless stupid sheep").

There were examples of more sympathetic dialogue, as the next set of posts from the same thread demonstrates. Such posts were from participants who were

involved with drugs or drug users in the past.

17 Posted by: Xmagingrrlx on [August 2001]

Drug users...I used to be one therefore 90% 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 b/c 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, but there are quite a few out there that are good people just doing their own thing just like me.

Posted by: xemox on [August 2001]

even though i don't know you outside the boards subway. i am SO INCREDIBLY proud of you.

all of my close friends are drug users to some extent. they inspire me every single day to be straight edge, mainly b/c i feel that just by my being straight edge, being thier friend, being there for them, and not making myself to come across as better than them b/c i don't do drugs; i have made a great difference in many of thier lives. i haven't "turned" anyone sxe yet. but i show them that a world w/o drugs can be just as much fun and exciting and creative. i'm really glad that these boards have helped you. you are a very intelligent person. with alot to offer the world. take care.

Posted by: Nebula on [August 2001]

I know 'helluva intelligent drug users. Most of my friends are drug users, & 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 & individualism, & a healthy life.

Xmagingrrlx pointed out that most of her friends were drug users, and therefore resisted other posters' methods (see Extract 16) of "judg[ing] people automatically b/c their idea of going out and having a good time is different then mine" But, her next sentence drew on a stereotypical belief, namely that "many of them have way too many brain cells missing to be worth my time." Posters distinguished between drug users who were friends, and drug users in general as an out-group. xemox described her/his pride in helping others to see "a world w/o drugs" and was happy to have friends who could benefit from her/his affiliation with straightedge. Being friends with these drug users was acceptable because there was the potential

that they would change to a cleaner lifestyle. Lastly, Nebula countered other posters' attributions of drug users as stupid by claiming to know many "intelligent drug users" (playing off the thread's title), and by not claiming a morally superior position by describing straightedge as different, but not better. But his neutralization also worked to justify his reasons for having drug-user friends. Nebula still constructed drug-users in opposition to "great clarity [sic] of mind, a good sense of self-worth & individualism, & a healthy life." There were no explicit or implicit claims by straightedgers that drug use was a valid or acceptable behavior. Straightedge social identity was constructed very much by emphasizing attributes that distinguished them from the drug culture.

### Constructing boundaries

A final aspect of understanding how forum participants expressed straightedge identities involves the construction of boundaries that contrast straightedge with mainstream culture. Participants sometimes articulated a social awareness of identity, as the following post exemplifies.

18 From XstanleyX on 08.25.2002, 08:01 AM:

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 dillute my will. I claim sXe because i'm smart and angry and rebellious, and i will question everthing that society trys to forse me to swallow. Fight the mind numbing bullshit .

For Xstanleyx, straightedge was about questioning authority, about resistance. It was a phenomenon that was distinct and separate from mainstream culture ("I want an identity and a rebellious one at that") and by separating themselves ideologically, they believed they could live free from mainstream culture's demands

(“a society that wants to pollute my mind and dilute [sic] my will”). We see socially aware analyses of how “a lot of sxe kids” construct subcultural identities in reaction to social problems. Participants recognized the social sources of problems in their lives and affiliated with straightedge as a solution. In Extract (18), identity stood in opposition to not only the drug culture, but also against mainstream culture. This posture enabled straightedgers to avoid being classified as part of the conservative middle class, from which most of them come (Lahickey 1998).

There is more evidence that participants constructed subcultural boundaries between themselves and outsiders regardless of whether they expressed their affiliation through an individual or social identity.

19 +---Topic: Why are you straight edge?

Posted by: Bob Maslow on [September 2001]

[...] I don't drink because my father was an alcoholic for years, and messed up a lot of his life, my life, and the lives of my close family members. My mom was almost killed by a drunk driver. People get stupid and do stupid shit when they drink. I don't smoke because it's a waste of my money, and of my health, and it's not worth any of it. I don't ##### around because I tried that road once... and I ended up miserable and alone, and I'm not going to do that to my body and my mind. I'm not straight edge because someone else is telling me to be, or because it's cool, or because I want to fit in. I'm straight edge because I have chosen to live my life in these positive ways, and that is how I think it should be.

Extract (19) is an example of how some participants, in defining their “Edge,” wrote about myriad social experiences that together represented a reason for becoming straightedge. Many participants called the internalization of straightedge norms and beliefs “the Edge” and agreed that it was a personal phenomenon that was not the same between two participants. Bob Maslow listed phenomena that existed in contrast to straightedge, namely alcoholism, drunk drivers, smoking, and promiscuity. Stories such as his were used to create boundaries between the straightedge self and non-straightedge others by focusing on the negative



consequences associated with those behaviors. The phenomena listed, including how his mother was “almost killed by a drunk driver” represented social problems that were indicative of a negative mainstream culture. Straightedge was implicitly defined by Bob Maslow as an individual reaction to these problems (“I have chosen to live *my* life in these positive ways”), but not as a collective solution. Bob Maslow’s post expressed an individualistic interpretation of why he became straightedge, but attributed the reasons to larger social problems.

In contrast, there were participants who named their own previous behaviors, or a realization of the dangers in their behaviors, as consequential in the development of a straightedge identity.

20 +---Topic: Why are you straight edge?

Posted by: exitexistence on [September 2001]

I used to drink...not a lot, but I used to. Then I started to think "Why the hell am I doing this?" So I stopped. I used to smoke too...but I never did drugs (crack, etc). I decided that living that way was just stupid and I've never touched the stuff since. I didn't even know what straight edge was until like last year...and like [another participant] said, I took on the name because it would be easier. I'm not straight edge to become something...I just didn't feel like ruining myself anymore.

Posted by: sal on [September 2001]

i used to do weed, smoke and drink alot

one day i drank so much i was uncouncious, then i started to vomit and nearly chocked to death, until a m8 turned me over.

I didnt even know it had happened till i woke up.

[...] I only did the drugs because others did them, i only wasted money and my health on them

Participants in Extract (20) made straightedge identities relevant in relation to prior non-straightedge behaviors. After giving up drugs and/or alcohol, they found in straightedge identity an easier way to maintain their drug free status. In Extract (20) exitexistence wrote of becoming straightedge after analyzing her/his own behaviors and asking “why the hell am I doing this?” Likewise, sal reported waking

up from alcohol-related unconsciousness and later deciding that such behavior was self-destructive (“I only wasted money and my health”). His earlier identity was seen as conformist (“I only did the drugs because others did them”).

Subcultural boundaries are clarified when norm violations by participants are identified. In cases where participants engaged in activities/behaviors that others defined as “breaking their Edge,” discursive boundaries were brought to bear.

These boundaries acted to separate out those who violated straightedge rules and were sanctioned. I consider one such example.

21 +-- take the X's from my name

From xXnotatoyXx on 10.23.2002, 08:35 PM:

hey, haven't been here for a while. 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 b/c i have so much respect for the sxe community. so please take the X's from my name.

peace,

be yourself at all costs

In this thread root, xXXnotatoyXxx decided that she did not want to follow the rules (“get some stuff out of my system”) and asked that the ‘X’s be removed from her name. When asked if she would share the reason for her decision,

xXXnotatoyXxx said:

22 From xXnotatoyXx on 10.23.2002, 09:13 PM:

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. that i have control over my life and i am not trying to live up to anyones expectations but my own

xXXnotatoyXxx did not explain why she took a sleeping pill or cold medicine, but did write that “granted i won’t do that again,” suggesting her acknowledgement of the behavior as a violation of subcultural norms. Her sentence, “I have decided to

drink once in a while” was perceived as an open and unashamed admission of her willingness to use a social drug and it drew immediate fire from several of the forum’s participants. One participant simply posted the question, “Again?”, implying that xXXnotatoyXxx had perhaps reported engaging in similar behavior before. Another participant was explicit in his disapproval of her proposed behavior and suggested that, regardless of her claims, xXXnotatoyXxx had no control over her life.

23 From Ethical Underground on 10.25.2002, 07:41 AM:  
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. thats why they call it ADDICTION, sweetheart, because IT controls YOU.

InnNerd immediately supported Ethical Underground’s position. Further, InnNerd’s post questioned xXXnotatoyXxx’s sanity in suggesting that a “rational human being” would not do such a thing.

24 From InnNerd on 10.25.2002, 08:29 AM:  
Can I get an Amen, Brother!!  
AntiBarbie, I refer you to my signature. 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.

Some participants mixed pity with an apparent lack of sympathy for xXXnotatoyXxx and expressed the idea she would become a problem to others around her:

25 From ThreeSixNine on 10.25.2002, 02:07 PM:  
have fun being fucked up barbie. i feel bad for those around you who hoped you would be clean.

A heated debate arose over xXXnotatoyXxx’s choice to do what she wanted to do. Some participants argued in line with the posters who wrote, “sad, but whatever you wanna do, whatever makes you happy,” and “do what’s right for

you.” That is, while some were saddened by her choice, they sympathized with her and wanted to see her do her own thing. XXXnotatoyXxx was alternatively supported in her decision or ridiculed. The divergent responses to her post could reflect various interpretations of rules among forum participants.

One aspect of this analysis is the fact that two of xXXnotatoyXxx’s critics explicitly self-identified as non-straightedgers, yet regularly policed straightedge boundaries in the forum. Ethical Underground (Extract 10) did not self-identify as straightedge because the category was meaningless to him. Rather, he expressed a belief in living a life free from alcohol, drugs and animal products and called himself drug free. Similarly, ThreeSixNine claimed in the forum and during an interview that he was drug free but not straightedge. Yet, these two participants, like others in other situations, actively constructed straightedge identities that positioned them on the inside and others on the outside.

The importance in analyzing the creation and maintenance of subcultural boundaries is in how individual identity is created through CMC. Self-categorization by participants is certainly one way of defining subcultural boundaries. But, my analysis suggests that the straightedge subculture (at least in this online case study) consists of both individuals that self-identify as well as individuals who do not self-identify themselves as straightedge. In a much older thread, participants were asked: “who on these forums are sXe and who isn’t?” Of the sixty-six different participants who posted messages, fifty claimed to be straightedge, eleven self-identified as non-straightedge, and five posted ambiguous statements. In addition to people who did not self-identify as straightedge, subcultural identities online were redefined to include individuals who explicitly

rejected the straightedge label and to exclude individuals who self-identified as straightedge but who engaged in behaviors that violated a rule.

The straightedge subculture under investigation is made up of a significant percentage of individuals who do not self-identify as straightedge. Yet, they interact regularly in the straightedge forum and in some cases are relatively prolific in terms of online participation (see ThreeSixNine's statistics in Table 3.1). Many of these individuals followed the same rules as self-identifying straightedgers, but they reported that the straightedge label was meaningless to them. The straightedge forum is thus constituted through a diversity of individuals who engage in conversation about subculturally-relevant topics. Individuals who do not self-identify as straightedge nevertheless contribute to the Straight Edge Discussion forum. Their presence is acknowledged by other participants and their absence was noted. The forum is not comprised of a homogeneous set of people who share rigid beliefs; rather it is a shifting terrain within which a heterogeneous population of youth interact and identify in various ways with straightedge.

### Summary

In this chapter I proposed how forum participants construct and project aspects of identity and affiliation, and how subcultural boundaries are constructed through interaction. The analysis supports an interactionist conception of subcultures as arising through interpersonal communication. It also draws on social psychological theories of social identity in describing subcultural participation. Participants sometimes expressed individual identities by referring to straightedge as a lifestyle or a personal choice through which roles were enacted. Characterizing

straightedge this way highlights the linkages between self, role, and the subculture's normative structure. Other times participants expressed social identities by drawing categorical distinctions between themselves as subculturalists and mainstream or drug culture members as outsiders. In such cases, straightedge was characterized more as an organization with membership connotations.

One interpretation of why participants sometimes articulated an individual identity, rather than a social identity, is related to a basic problem of subcultural affiliation – implied conformity and loss of individuality (Muggleton 2000). Yet, claiming a social identity makes reference to membership in a category and thus is potentially empowering. Widdicombe (1998a) notes that “the same features of categories which provide for their functional utility may also present inferential problems for those to whom the category is directly or indirectly applied” (p. 53). How participants identified themselves may thus be linked to their valuations of straightedge as a category. Those who saw straightedge (as role and category) as empowering and self-satisfying were more likely to express a social identity. Those who saw straightedge as an empowering role but as a stigmatized category (e.g., those who labeled Salt Lake City straightedgers as thugs) were more likely to express only an individual identity. Thus, claiming a straightedge identity and claiming support for subcultural rules are not necessarily the same.

Two new questions raised in this chapter are: Why are there so many non-straightedgers involved in an explicitly straightedge Internet forum, and what are the consequences of the influx and participation of such people? The answer to the first question seems to be that mass and new communication media such as magazines, TV, and the Internet have facilitated the spread of information about

straightedge beyond its original, local (i.e., f2f) punk/hardcore boundaries. Participants listed all the above media as primary sources of knowledge about straightedge and described them as key reasons that they learned about straightedge. The answer to the second part of the question is more complex and I devote the remaining chapters to developing a preliminary answer. In Chapter 6, I investigate more closely the relationships between participants who use the Straight Edge Discussion forum to enhance participation in f2f subcultural scenes and those who rely solely on the Internet for subcultural participation. In Chapter 7 I offer a more detailed analysis of straightedge norms. In the concluding chapter, I suggest how the influx of new types of subcultural participants facilitate change in the straightedge subculture.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Straightedge, music, and the Internet**

#### Introduction

In this chapter I focus on both the historical changes and contemporary dynamics of the subculture according to Straight Edge Discussion forum participants. In particular, I analyze a debate regarding to the relative roles of music and the Internet in the subculture. A remarkable shift appears to be occurring within the straightedge subculture in which the centrality of punk/hardcore music is being challenged. The challenge grows as more people outside of the punk and hardcore subcultures learn about straightedge via new media such as the Internet and begin self-identifying as straightedge. The shift in participation is conceptualized most clearly as “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1995). Participants use subcultural capital to support claims for who is and is not an authentic participant of the subculture. As mentioned in chap. 2, authenticity refers to how participants justify their affiliation with or participation in a subculture (Muggleton 2000; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990; 1995) By mapping out the debate among conflicting participants over authenticity, I suggest what role the Internet may play in facilitating subcultural change.

I begin by defining the hardcore-straightedge music scene and then look at the origins of straightedge as described by forum participants. Next, I create analytic distinctions between hardcore, non-hardcore, and drug free participants and examine how each category differs. After describing the debate among these member types, I provide an in-depth analysis of how participants express authentic subcultural identities. Finally, I look at how non-hardcore participants assess the



Internet and the forum in terms of subcultural participation. This chapter is explicitly geared toward answering Research Question 3: What are the differences between Internet participants who discover the straightedge subculture online versus those who are socialized via f2f scenes? By analyzing the threads created to debate this issue, changes occurring within straightedge subculture, as well as how participants discursively achieve authenticity as subcultural participants, become more obvious.

### The American hardcore/straightedge music scene

From the perspective of Simon Frith's (1981, 1996) theory of the consequentiality of music in subcultural formation and experience, music is more than a form of subcultural style, it is an essential component of many contemporary youth subcultures. Frith writes:

In examining the aesthetics of popular music...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)

Similarly, Thomas Cushman sees music as “not simply a static cultural object which [is] produced and consumed, but an active code of resistance and a template which [is] used for the formation of new forms of individual and collective identity (Cushman 1995:91). The American hardcore-straightedge music scene fits well within such a conception of music, culture and identity. Hardcore arose in the US in the early 1980s as a reaction to the style-driven punk scenes that were being imported from the UK via punk and mainstream distribution networks (Leblanc 2001). Many early British punks emphasized identity through style and “integrity to

the movement was measured by an ability to create one's own costume and therefore persona" (Brake 1985:77). American hardcore participants in the 1980s tended to avoid the leather jackets, bondage gear, and the radical hairstyles reminiscent of 1970s British punks, which they saw as peripheral to the essence of punk ideology (Mattson 2001). They attempted to exclude fashion from punk, leaving only the hard core – punk ideologies of resistance to mainstream cultural values and norms (see Lamy and Levin 1986). Straightedge has been affiliated with the American hardcore scene since its origin.

Hardcore scene participants throughout the 1980s and 1990s rejected the nihilistic and style-driven aspects of punk in favor of more active forms of resistance to what they saw as capitalist hegemony (Mattson 2001)<sup>23</sup>. Likewise, for many hardcore straightedgers in the forum, punk was seen as passive, self-indulgent and irresponsible, like mainstream youth culture. Punk was not only about style, but according to the media, was about being out of control as well.

**SubPush:** when straightedge started it was a reaction to the way that punks were portayed (sp?) by the media and this idea that to be punk you had to be self destructive. now its become so powerful that its kind of like we can look at it as reacting to the idea that ANY kid needs to be self destructive

Hardcore straightedge was seen as a reaction not only to punk's emphasis on style, but to the disaffection and subsequent self-destructive tendencies of many punks (Fox 1987; Leblanc 2001). Hardcore straightedge later became "so powerful" that it was seen as not merely as a schism of punk, but a free-standing youth subculture.

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<sup>23</sup> I do not argue that members of the hardcore and straightedge are not style conscious, for style is a part of all (sub)cultures. In January 2003 I started a thread in the forums entitled, "what makes for straightedge fashion these days," and got many responses regarding what individuals wore. But I got as many reproaching responses as sartorial descriptions. Answers stated repeatedly that straightedge was not about fashion or style, but about clean living and commitment to straightedge values, beliefs and norms.

Distinguishing punk and hardcore was difficult for some forum participants. In writing about music or the larger youth culture that encompassed straightedge, many participants relied alternatively on either one term or the other, while some participants used the terms together – “hardcore/punk” or “HC punk.” The following analysis focuses on participants who saw straightedge as inextricably linked to the hardcore/punk music scenes versus those who did not.

The creation of hardcore music has followed a Do It Yourself (DIY) philosophy of avoiding the corporate music production/distribution apparatus (Mattson 2001; McKay 1998). Hardcore straightedge music is published and distributed exclusively by participants themselves, and individuals and bands who support mainstream media outlets are often labeled as inauthentic participants or “sell-outs.” Minor Threat’s Ian MacKaye, for example, started the company Dischord Records 20 years ago to distribute his and other local bands’ music. Other straightedge record labels exist, the most prominent perhaps being Revelation Records (Lahickey 1998). Music is the primary medium through which the straightedge subculture spread over the last two decades. In the following interview extract, PunkRockBob describes his understanding of straightedge’s musical history.

**Patrick:** How much of a role do you think music played in the beginning of straightedge?

**PunkRockBob:** the phrase first came about in a song and the ppl that called themselves straight edge were in bands or into bands so i think it is fairly important. that is why straight edge is partly about the music. that is where it came from, and i think those kinda roots shud b respected and known about

PunkRockBob acknowledged straightedge’s musical roots and said that straightedge “is partly about the music.” This is one of the early lessons that he learned as a new participant in the forum. Later I will suggest what he meant by

“partly.” Outsiders have also identified straightedge as a music-based phenomenon. As preliminary work for this dissertation, I located and read eighty newspaper and magazine articles about straightedge from across the US. The headlines of a convenient selection of articles draws attention to straightedge’s music base: “Melodies Amid Rant, Thoughts Amid Rage” (Pareles 1991); “The scene: they’re clean-cut – but with an edge; their music is hard-core – so is their stand against meat, drugs, racism” (Jones 1994); “Kids’ saviors or facists [sic]? Offshoot of punk rock swears off booze, drugs and causal sex” (Lee-Shanok 1997); “Making a choice: Britain’s Straight Edgers don’t drink, smoke or take drugs. They don’t believe in casual sex and most of them are vegan. But, they listen to hardcore punk and are some of today’s most rebellious teenagers” (Midgely 1999). These headlines, spread over a decade, describe straightedge as a rebellious music subculture.

Straightedgers are typically portrayed paradoxically: they are “clean cut” but “rebellious” and have “an edge” about them, suggesting they are not the ideal kid – clean cut and well-behaved. The subculture’s musical history is the reference point those who criticize straightedge as well:

“Music is the textbook that tells Straight Edgers how to live their lives,” said [Salt Lake City Police Officer] Nelson, who spent 10 years in the Straight Edge "scene" before leaving it behind for a career in law enforcement. “If a song tells them to blow up a mink farm, that's what they're going to do.” (Cantera 2002)

Officer Nelson, a former straightedger, believed that music was powerful enough to determine straightedgers’ behaviors. Claims like these, while overstated, point to the centrality of music within the straightedge subculture.

### Straightedge's origin

Origin stories of straightedge can be found in books (Lahickey 1998), social scientific research (Wood 2001), radio shows (BBC N.d.), magazines/fanzines (Berwick, N.d.), and at the beginning of this dissertation. In a series of interviews with straightedgers from the 1980s and 1990s, Beth Lahickey (1998) found that whenever the origin of straightedge was discussed, MacKaye or Minor Threat were named. MacKaye has an explanation for why the straightedge subculture arose.

**Ian:** [...] so there are gigs that you can't go to. It stinks. So my point of view is fuck them [the establishment where the gig takes place], and from the time that I was sixteen or seventeen years old I've always been opposed to that idea. [...] The idea that you can't go see music is absurd. And who of all people—what age group really is music the most important to—

**EMMIE:** Teenagers.

**Ian:** Exactly. Teenagers. Because music is the soundtrack for the transition—it's an important transition in life. And the idea that they're cut out because the alcohol industry—that's disgusting to me. So my point of view was always like, I think it's so loathsome, the whole thing is so loathsome, that I've never had any second thoughts about it. [Regarding straightedge] Um, my sense was I was singing about my right as an individual. It's an incredible phenomenon, in a way, but I don't take any credit for it. All I did was put a name on something that was already existing... (edited from Berwick N.d.)

In this interview MacKaye has four points. First, he makes music an explicit component of his formulation. Second, he links music directly to the concept of youth. He describes how bothered he was that he and other youth were cut off from experiencing music by minimum drinking age laws – what he calls “the alcohol industry.” His notion that “music is the soundtrack for the transition” is both poetic and crucial in how it connects youth and music. Third, MacKaye describes straightedge as his “rights as an individual.” He formulates straightedge as a personal philosophy rather than as a social group or movement. Lastly, he posits

that straightedge, as a phenomenon, preceded him and that his naming of it was coincidental.

Although straightedge was envisioned as a personal statement of action and an individual philosophy, Ian MacKaye came to realize that the music was being interpreted in a way that he had not anticipated.

**Ian:** What I didn't take into account, however, was this—that it would become a series of directives that could be then honed into something that would become basically a uniform. The way that it was received by some people was that it was basically a blueprint for a movement, or a cult, or something, and instead of a declaration of personal value it was a series of orders for other people, a this-is-what-you're-supposed-to-do. And then of course they—some people—brought their own sense of fundamentalism into that. So as soon as this inkling of a movement came up, early on, I mean you can hear, even as early as, I think, the Out of Step [1981b] record, I say its not a set of rules [...] I don't do these things, [but] I'm not ordering people not to do them. But the idea of a movement in 1982, probably, it already started to form and I'm already resisting that idea because for me movements—my experience with movements is that they take precedence over humans, and I've always been clear in my mind that while I hate habit I don't hate humans. [...] The movement thing, it just took off on its own. (Berwick N.d.)

Whatever his intent, the music was interpreted by many in the punk and hardcore scenes as the structure for a cohesive subculture complete with rules and norms.

Discussions about the origin of the straightedge subculture appeared online. One apparent reason for these discussions may be boundary disputes associated with the presence of non-punk and non-hardcore individuals in the forum that self-identified as straightedge. Some participants argued that, because straightedge's roots were locatable in the punk and hardcore music scenes of the early 1980s, straightedge was thus definable only by punk and hardcore music. Others argued that while the origin of straightedge was grounded in punk and hardcore, the meaning of the straightedge has evolved. This second perspective was represented by PunkRockBob, who claimed that straightedge was only “partly about the music.”

The thread below demonstrates how non-hardcore forum participants viewed the relationship between straightedge's origin and the punk/hardcore music scenes:

1 +---Topic: why..

Posted by: Xnemo44X on [August 2001]

i just made the mistake of talking to a poison free non-sXer. i said sXe came about as an active counter culture to the typical punk/hardcore scene, she apparently misunderstood what i was saying. she wont stop saying crap like 'your exact words were "you cant be sXe if youre not punk rock"'. its just pissing me off so bad, do any of you guys get this type of crap? shes clean yet patronizes(sp?) for saying something that i never said. was i wrong to say that? i dont call my self 'punk' yet i kinda dress like i would i guess, what the #####?? how can i get the point across that sXe was in fact made for those in the punk/hardcore scene while not sounding close-minded or hypocritical or something like that? i have to take crap from non-sXers all the time, but [should] not from other people who share many of my same beliefs.

Posted by: xamalekx

simple: don't talk about punk having anything to do with sXe unless you're discussing the origin.

In this thread Xnemo44X complained that a statement to a “poison free non-straightedger” (a “drug free” person) about straightedge's origin was misinterpreted as being a declaration that only punk/hardcore participants could be straightedge. Xnemo44X appeared to reject this, and asked other forum participants for advice. xamalekx provided the only direct feedback to Xnemo44X's question by stating the way to avoid trouble is not to bring up punk except for discussions about straightedge's origin. Neither of these participants accepted the idea that contemporary straightedge was limited to the punk/hardcore scene.

Whether users considered themselves hardcore, they agreed that straightedge originated in the punk/hardcore music scenes. For example, in Extract (1) both of the participants self-identified as straightedgers with their online usernames, which contained the 'X'. Yet, both participants also rejected an exclusive relationship between straightedge and punk/hardcore. For these participants at least

straightedge subculture had become partially de-linked from its music-based subcultural origin. The question is whether self-identification is enough to be a subcultural participant, or if one's identity has to be validated by others. The debates surrounding the validity of statements like those of Xnemo44X and xamalekx's, as well as their (and others') claims to authentic subcultural identity, were highly problematic in the Straight Edge Discussion forum.

### Claims to authentic straightedge identity

2 +---Topic: Who can say?

Posted by: MeanBug on [March 2001]

I've been officially straight edge for about 1.5 yrs now. I believe this is a lifelong 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 I live in Idaho (self explanatory there) but he said hanging out w/ other sXe ppl was a must. Now, im the only 1 I know. Do I have a problem?

In Extract (2), MeanBug expressed concern about her/his authenticity as an "official" straightedger. Questions like this, as well as answer given by other participants, provided opportunities for debates about the meaning of straightedge among hardcore straightedgers (or hardcores), non-hardcore straightedgers (or netedgers), and drug free participants. These categories are analytic constructs that I employ to help make sense of the divergent trajectories and arguments posed in the forum, which emerged from the forum and from interviews.

Individuals from the three categories tended to take one of two positions in these threads. Participants either supported the notion that only participants of a hardcore music scene could be straightedge or the idea that anyone who followed the straightedge norms could be straightedge. The positions thus revolved around



claims to subcultural "authenticity" (McLeod 1999; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990, 1995).

3 | -- What is Straight Edge all about?

From WhiteTrash on 11.01.2001, 05:40 PM:

Does punk rock, hardcore or whatever it is called nowadays still have a role in the straight edge movement? It appears that this is the kind of music everyone here listens to. I guess what I'm asking is can you separate the music from the scene or are they intertwined. I think the music and the "punk rock" culture is what makes straight edge unique so the two cannot and should not be separated.

From XzeroX on 11.01.2001, 05:58 PM:

i too believe that straight edge and hardcore/punk should forever be intertwined. i wouldnt, however, tell someone that they cant be sXe unless they listen to punk. this will be a touchy subject, so heads up.

From amalek on 11.01.2001, 11:35 PM:

i don't believe so at all. music may have 'spawned' straight edge, but i believe straight edge is fully independant from any musical 'scene'. besides, i don't listen to punk rock.

From xantagx on 11.01.2001, 11:58 PM:

[...] straight edge can't be independent of the music. it's a subculture centered around a style of music. you take away the music, you take away the subculture, and all you have left is a bunch of drug free kids.

[...]

From amalek on 11.02.2001, 03:37 AM:

so you're saying i'm not straight edge? i find that extremely funny, because that's bullshit. i don't listen to hardcore, and i'm straight edge.

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 03:51 AM:

what makes you straight edge then?

what's the difference between you and say the average mormon, if it is isn't lifestyle.

From TheMan on 11.02.2001, 03:54 AM:

I guess I'm not straight edge either? Shall I delete this site?

In the opening post above, WhiteTrash asked whether punk/hardcore and straightedge could exist separate from each other and subsequently stated his opinion that they could not. xzerox responded to WhiteTrash's post with a similar

but more inclusive perspective, that while s/he agreed that straightedge and hardcore were linked, s/he would not presume to decide who could self-identify as straightedge. Amalek's post represented the opposite view to WhiteTrash's – he claimed the straightedge label but rejected its musical roots. Xantagx and amalek then began a dialogue about what they called the straightedge lifestyle, though each defined it differently. The last post by TheMan was important because he owned the website, yet did not consider himself hardcore. He suggested that, if non-hardcore participants were not straightedge, then the website became meaningless.

Participants in Extract (3) presented their individual perspectives in 434 separate posts (the largest thread in the forum during my 18 months there). After ten days of debate, the thread was closed by a moderator due to the inability of some participants to respectfully debate, i.e., the extent of personal attacks made by participants on both sides. The heat of the debate can be understood by what was at stake: authenticity of participants' straightedge identities. Some hardcore participants attempted to exclude non-hardcore participants from claiming to be straightedge, while some non-hardcore participants argued in favor of a broader definition of straightedge identity.

The main sticking point was grounded in definitions of hardcore music and the hardcore "scene."

4 | -- What is Straight Edge all about?  
From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 05:01 AM:  
if hardcore has nothing to do with straight edge, then why are the only bands that are straight edge ARE hardcore bands? Why is straight edge a subculture of hardcore? [...] with out the scene, without the music, there is straight but no edge.

[...]

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 05:51 PM:  
straight edge is a specific lifestyle that has everything to do with hardcore and the hardcore scene, without it there is no straight edge.

From amalek on 11.02.2001, 08:08 PM:  
[...] straight edge may have been born out of the punk/hardcore movement, but IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH HARDCORE! you do NOT need to listen to hardcore to be straight edge. where do you get the idea that if you don't listen to a certain style of music you're not edge? or if you don't "go to shows" or are "in the scene" you're not edge? what i was trying to point out is that straight edge is a commitment till death of being drug free. being "drug free" can just be a temporary state and you aren't bound by anything. straight edge is a bond.

From WhiteTrash on 11.02.2001, 08:21 PM:  
If straight edge has nothing to do with the punk rock/hardcore/alternative lifestyle, then how is it any different from traditional societal values? Or, is it not any different? Is its only unique feature putting an X on your hand?

From amalek on 11.02.2001, 08:26 PM:  
very well. then i guess because i downloaded an mp3 of minor threat's "Straight edge" i'm officially straight edge. WOOHOO!! tell all your friends to download "minor threat - straight edge" to become straight edge! /snicker

From WhiteTrash on 11.02.2001, 08:31 PM:  
To follow that up: My grandma doesn't do drugs and is morally opposed to them. I guess she and her 80 year old friends are straight edge too! I'll ge ther to X up next time she leaves the house.

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 08:38 PM:  
GRANNY CIRCLE PIT!

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 08:41 PM:  
you're trying way too hard to hold onto something to be cool. If it doesn't fit what you want it to be, you just change it to fit, so you can have a cool label to call yourself. Straight edge is more than being drug free. it's more than being "committed til death". It's a lifestyle, a scene, a community and a style of music. But I guess none of that matters to you, because you heard about straight edge on the internet and want so hard to believe that you're willing to twist shit around so you can be cool at high school.

[...]

From Nebula on 11.02.2001, 09:36 PM:  
Let's go like this: xantagx heard "Straight Edge" by Minor Threat. He heard about sXe from bands & his friends. He thinks it's cool. A girl who listens to Korn [a non-straightedge, non-hardcore band] would like to be part of a philosophy that embraces anti-drugs. She hears about it from the internet. She thinks it's cool. A

boy who listens to Metallica & Megadeath gets made fun of because he doesn't do pot. He finds someone with X's on their hands who tells him about sXe. He decides to put X's on his hand & to hang out with the other kid as to make a statement about not doing drugs. Just because you like to fit into trends doesn't mean others have to.

Hardcore and non-hardcore participants posted claims to authentic subcultural identity. Xantagx and WhiteTrash both pointed to hardcore music as a subcultural boundary, first by suggesting that straightedge bands were all hardcore and second by suggesting cultural or social-categorical differences between straightedgers and non-hardcore people (e.g., grandmothers) who happened to share beliefs about clean living. Xantagx's remark about a "circle pit" referred to the hardcore dance style of moshing or slam dancing (see Allan and Kidder 2000), thus further distinguishing the cultural aspects of straightedge individuals from merely straight individuals.

Non-hardcore participants also made claims to authentic straightedge identity by focusing on lifestyle choices rather than the music scene. Whereas hardcore participants tended to discuss straightedge by referring to a scene, non-hardcore participants often expressed straightedge as commitment to subcultural norms. Amalek argued that a commitment to clean living (a commitment "till death") was the true source of straightedge identity, not musical preference. Amalek also challenged music preference by claiming that by downloading a Minor Threat song, one could magically be transformed into being "officially straightedge." Nebula supported amalek's claims by describing how interaction enabled the diffusion of straightedge beyond the boundaries of the hardcore music scene.

Also in Extract (4), participants on both sides of the issue used the ideas of trendiness to separate authentic from inauthentic participants. Non-hardcore

participants characterized straightedge as a life-long commitment that transcended musical appreciation, which they saw as trying to be trendy. They subsequently rejected following music trends as a prerequisite for being straightedge (“Just because you like to fit into trends doesn’t mean others have to”). Hardcore forum participants alternatively treated non-hardcore participants’ claims to straightedge identity as attempts to “be cool at high school” by self-identifying as straightedge only to claim membership in a subcultural scene. In both cases, participants represented trendiness as an unfavorable aspect of subcultural participation (see also Muggleton 2000). Authentic straightedge identity was expressed being committed to a community or scene, or as a life-long commitment. Authentic straightedge identity seemed to be constructed around the idea of commitment, yet the nature of commitment was different. For the hardcore participants, commitment was expressed in terms of categorical membership, while non-hardcore participants expressed commitment to the straightedge role.

Hardcore forum participants wrote about the scene as a necessary element in constructing a straightedge identity. According to one I interviewed, the scene was defined by with whom one associates. “Well i hang out with a lot of kids that share my anti-drug beliefs within the hardcore community. [...] its generally the same kids hanging out together almost every weekend and exchanging ideas, I’d say yes it is a scene, because its at least somewhat based on the fact that we have mutual interests and goals.” The interviewee reported that non-hardcore participants were “not really edge,” even though his definition of scene seemed to match what all forum participants were doing online: hanging out with other kids who shared

similar anti-drug beliefs. Other definitions of scene placed explicit emphasis on music, as the following thread post and interview excerpt indicate:

5 | -- involved in the scene?

From xxxwah~~ on 11.12.2002, 06:56 PM:

yeah going to shows would be the base I guess, but not just that. I think its alot in helping out to fuel that scene in anyway you can whether it be posting flyers, helping setup gear at a show, working the door, doing favours for bands etc. Being in a band is all good too.

\* \* \*

**xHCgrrrlx:** [the scene is] a group of kids in a city that are all edge and go to edge shows and listen to edge bands... it's more than just kids sitting around not doing drugs.

In Extract (5), the scene had to do with one's relationship to the production, distribution, and consumption of hardcore/straightedge music. The scene involved listening to straightedge music, actively helping to keep the music scene alive. In the interview excerpt, the definition of scene was conceived of as a "group" consisting of kids who all shared a subcultural identification ("kids...that are all edge") and participated together in the straightedge music scene ("go to edge shows and listen to edge bands"). The interviewee explicitly stated that the scene was "more than just kids sitting around not doing drugs." Whether implicit or explicit, the scene was represented by straightedgers who participated in local subcultural events such as concerts.

Many non-hardcore participants agreed that straightedge was about a scene, but rejected the idea that the scene was only about music.

6 | -- What is Straight Edge all about?

From XdoitdoitX on 11.02.2001, 05:21 PM:

since most people who are straight edge come from the hardcore scene, everyone assumes one has to listen to hardcore to be straight edge. sure thats where it came from, but people make the decision all the time to be drug free without ever hearing of *chain of strength*. they just happen to start

claiming edge because the of the education through the internet and other media.

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 09:09 PM:  
why have there been so many sxers who didn't listen to hardcore? the internet.  
worst thing to ever happen to sxe or hardcore.

XdoitdoitX noted that the Internet offered a source of information to non-hardcore individuals, some of whom subsequently found the subculture appealing and began to self-identify. Xantagx responded by stating that the Internet brought unwelcome individuals into the subculture. In the following posts, a proponent of the hardcore perspective answers a question about whether individuals without local hardcore music scenes should be excluded from straightedge.

7 From WhiteTrash on 11.02.2001, 11:39 PM:  
I don't really want to answer this question for fear of sounding like I am the decider of what is straight edge, but I'll do so because you asked. Based on what you said (you are into the indie scene etc) you would be straight edge -- even if there are no formal shows in yur area. The reason is that you are into that type of subculture.

From WhiteTrash on 11.02.2001, 11:45 PM:  
Number of friends is not important. What is important is participation in the punk/indie subculture. Participation includes listening to the music, interacting with others in the scene, going to shows, even popping up on the internet.

From Augusta on 11.03.2001, 12:28 AM:  
but there is no straight edge "scene" anywhere near me. so im not striahgt edge?  
because my surroudings deny that?

From WhiteTrash on 11.03.2001, 12:34 AM:  
Scene includes everything from listening to music, to going to shows to the internet. So, yes you can be straight edge.

WhiteTrash, an advocate of the hardcore definition of straightedge, responded to an earlier post about whether hardcore music fans could adopt a straightedge identity. He perceived that Internet participation counted, but music preference remained a

key definitional component. He believed that straightedgers should at least be hardcore music fans if they could not participate in a local hardcore-straightedge music scene. Later in the thread, Shane MV claimed that there was no hardcore scene in his area and asked if that was sufficient to exclude him from being straightedge (see also Extract 2). WhiteTrash's response was that, so long as one also listened to hardcore-straightedge music, s/he could be straightedge.

*Hardcore straightedge and the 'scene elites'*

8 | -- So how do you hardcore kids feel about supporting this site?  
From SubPush on 11.20.2002, 03:06 AM:  
my life revolves around supporting the hardcore scene because i know that i owe hardcore my life. without it i would be dead or alone with no self confidence. it wasn't until i was exposed to the hardcore scene that i felt like i could stand up for myself and use my own voice. because of the support of some older members of the scene i learned how to stand up for myself and i learned that i could have joy in my life and not be absolutely anti social. i can not say that i would still be alive today if i was not exposed to hardcore as i constantly considered suicide during my early adolescence due to feelings of alienation, loneliness, and disillusionment. i felt like there was no one who i could relate to. i owe it to the hardcore scene to give back as much as i can because it has given me everything.

The f2f hardcore scene held more meaning for some forum participants than for others. In Extract (8), SubPush described to other forum participants how important the hardcore scene was to him. For him, it was a social space in which he constructed meaningful social and individual identities. In an interview SubPush expounded upon his conception that hardcore was more than a subculture, it was a community where he found solidarity with like-minded others (i.e., the scene). And, straightedge provided SubPush a set of rules that made sense to him as an alternative to the Irish American culture that he thought had pushed drinking and fighting on him while growing up.



During the interview SubPush also described the relationship between straightedge and hardcore through the average punk experience of alcohol and drugs:

**SubPush:** [...] straightedge has been part of the hardcore culture for so long and i think before the straightedge movement began it was seen as like almost uncanny for someone to listen to punk and not to drink or get fucked up.

SubPush wrote about straightedge and its embeddedness within the larger punk/hardcore subcultures and claimed that it was senseless to think of it any other way. When I asked him about forum participants who self-identified as straightedge but did not participate in the hardcore music scene, he replied, “a lot of those kids i think are becoming ‘straight but not edge’.” He created a distinction between those whom he considered authentic participants of the straightedge subculture and those who were not. He did not challenge the beliefs of non-hardcore forum participants, but he was clear in his conviction that they were not authentic straightedge participants. At the end of our interview we discussed the debates between hardcore and non-hardcore participants and he described how he and other hardcore participants had helped change the minds of some non-hardcore participants about self-identifying as straightedge.

**Patrick:** What if I bring up the fact that those people who change their minds typically quit claiming edge. Is it okay that sXe is losing potential members?

**SubPush:** yup. none of them, from what i understand have changed their views on drugs. just the movement, which is fine with me.

While SubPush supported youth who followed the rules of straightedge, he did not want non-hardcore individuals to identify as straightedge. To him, this diluted the potency of what he called “the movement” by opening it up to mainstream youth. Other participants echoed his sentiments. In Extract (9), another hardcore

participant expresses the insignificance of non-hardcore straightedgers (“it doesn’t make me not edge”) while rejecting their claims to authenticity as subcultural participants (“but seriously you are not edge”).

9 | -- Live the life you want to, and give that right to others

From brantley on 11.20.2002, 10:54 PM:

Straight edge is a hardcore punk subculture. to make it anything else is pointless. can you call yourself a skater if you dont skate? or own a skate board? Sure you can, but in truth, in essence you are not a skater. This is the same as straight edge. Call yourself straightedge if you arent part of the scene, and drink, and smoke etc, but seriously you are not edge. and if you wanna claim it, i could care less. It doesnt make me not edge. it doesnt change what edge is.

From brantley on 12.02.2002, 11:56 PM:

most of the kids who are arguing to be accepted as edge, wont be x'ing up, wont be representing edge at shows. Wont be known through out the scene as straight edge. So who really cares? You wanna claim edge and not be a part of what it is.. sweet as. It doesnt make me or anyone else involved with straight edge less sXe. Just be yourselves. Who gives a fuck? Labels are just labels. And trying to argue what it is makes no sense. It is what it is. Thats all. If its not who you are, it doesn't make you any lesser person. At all.

Brantley’s views regarding non-hardcore straightedgers were complex in that he seemed to simultaneously accept and reject them as authentic straightedgers. In the first post, he dismissed individuals who were not part of the hardcore music scene as the equivalent of drinkers and smokers. Further, by making straightedge analogous to skating, he suggested that certain subcultural objects were necessary to complete the identity.

In the second post, he claimed that straightedge was “just a label,” thus suggesting that an authentic identity was more than self-identification. If this was the case, then his argument would support non-hardcore participants’ claim to authenticity. Reading further into his post suggests the opposite. Brantley added, “if it is not who you are, it doesn’t make you any lesser person,” thereby suggesting the existence of an authentic straightedge identity that non-hardcore participants

lacked. From this perspective, straightedge had an existence independent of the claims for authentic identity claimed by participants. In his second post in particular, Brantley indicated that any given individual's claim would neither validate nor invalidate the claim of another individual. Yet, he was sincere in his belief that non-hardcore participants' claims to authenticity were incorrect ("in *truth*, in *essence* you are not [straightedge]") because they remained separate from "what [straightedge] is." Brantley iterated several times in the forum and in an interview his respect for any individual who was willing to follow straightedge rules, but he held a narrow definition. At the conclusion of our interview he said, "i hope straightedge grows out side [sic] the scene into pop culture so kids can start feeling ok about being sober." This final statement seemed at odds with his thread posts and with much of his interview and I therefore do not interpret its meaning, but only note that he wanted straightedge behaviors to spread to mainstream youth culture.

What counted as authentic straightedge identity varied, even among the hardcore contingency. One hardcore straightedger started a thread based on the changing of straightedge beyond the hardcore scene.

10 +---Topic: I find it really strange that a lot of sXe kids dont

From xpeterx on 11.03.2001, 01:54 AM:

I find it really strange that a lot of straight edge kids on these forums arnt into hardcore, this is something ive never seen! The straight edge movement come from the hardcore scene, thats where its based! Ive been sXe for nearly 3 years & been an active part of the uk hardcore movement for about 6 (in bands, promoting shows, zines etc) and all the sXe kids are part of this (metal-core, emo, old school etc) but it seems these forums have tons of kids (well from what my questionnaire made out) that are sXe but dont listen to hc, we have nu-metal edges (bloody hell, nu-metal sXe!!! ), ska edges, even doom, goth & black metal sXe! im not saying you have to be hardcore to be sXe, its just so unexpected that the sXe movement has moved from hc & is now part of other geners! its pretty

cool really! It just goes to show what a cool movement sXe has become, progressing into something more than just a hc offshoot!!!

Xpeterx seemed excited about the possibilities of having non-hardcore individuals involved in the straightedge subculture (“its pretty cool really”). However, while xpeterx appeared open to accepting the idea of straightedge “progressing into something more than just a [hardcore] offshoot,” an alternative music preference remained an implicit component of his definition of straightedge, just as it did for WhiteTrash in Extract (7).

Typically, hardcore participants took either an inclusive or exclusive position vis-à-vis non-hardcore participants. An inclusive tone towards non-hardcore participants was represented by the post from XzeroX in Extract (3), where he stated that, while “hardcore/punk should be forever intertwined, I wouldn’t however tell someone that they can’t be sXe unless they listen to punk.” XzeroX not only accepted the idea that straightedge emerged from hardcore subculture, but argued that they should also be connected. Her/his view of the straightedge subculture did not preclude non-hardcore participants from claiming a straightedge identity, though there was an expressed recognition that other hardcore participants might not accept this.

The other position taken was more exclusive. There did not seem to be any overt animosity expressed by hardcore straightedgers towards non-hardcore participants, rather it was about “embodied subcultural capital” (Thornton 1995:11). Subcultural capital, that measure of “hipness” that Thornton claims is used by subcultural participants, “is embodied in the form of ‘being in the know’” (p. 11). For hardcore participants, being “in the know” related to knowledge and

appreciation of hardcore/straightedge music, dance and style. It was this lack of subcultural capital that made non-hardcore participants “straight but not edge.”

11 +---Topic: What is Straight Edge all about?

From WhiteTrash on 11.02.2001, 04:22 PM:

[...] hardcore has nothing to do with straight edge? Without it there would be no "straight edge" movement. Without the music and other forms of hardcore culture, would straight edge not be just another DARE program. If not the music then what separates straight edge from traditional mainstream culture?

WhiteTrash questioned what made straightedge different than other youth cultures that abstain from legal and illegal drug use, e.g., D.A.R.E. His answer was hardcore music. Implicit in his argument was the idea that non-hardcore participants lack knowledge of this subcultural component. Other hardcore participants drew similar analogies, as we saw in Extract (3) above:

12 [Post 6, Extract (3)]

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 03:51 AM:

what makes you straight edge then? what's the difference between you and say the average mormon, if it is isn't lifestyle.

Xantagx argued that a subcultural “lifestyle” was what separated straightedgers from mainstream youth culture. The claim that Mormons were “average” (I interpret xantagx as constructing Mormonism as a mainstream religion, regardless of accuracy) suggested that authentic straightedgers were by contrast not average people. Through their association with the underground music aspects of the subculture, hardcore participants became qualitatively different from non-hardcore participants. Hardcore straightedgers were also categorically different from mainstream youth, such as Mormons and D.A.R.E. participants. This difference was again highlighted when a hardcore participant pointed out:

13 +---Topic: What is Straight Edge all about?

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 05:01 AM:

with out the scene, without the music, there is straight but no edge.

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 05:51 PM:  
they [non-hardcore forum participants] aren't straight edge. they're "substance free". straight edge is a specific lifestyle that has everything to do with hardcore and the hardcore scene, without it there is no straight edge.

Hardcore participants directly questioned the authenticity of non-hardcore participants' claims to straightedge identity. Hardcore participants were called "scene elites" by one non-hardcore as a way of drawing attention to their exclusivist attitudes toward non-hardcore participants. The label "scene elite" also represented an attempt to de-value hardcore participants' capital by characterizing them as 'scenesters,' people who were perceived as too interested in the purity and exclusivity that they excluded new, so-called normal kids a part of the subcultural experience.

*The 'netedgers' – straight but not edge?*

Other participants individually and collectively resisted or rejected the exclusive links between straightedge and the hardcore music scene and tried to negotiate the subcultural boundaries guarded by hardcore participants. These forum participants relied on the Internet as their sole source of straightedge information and activity. They typically knew no straightedgers in the f2f world and were called "netedgers" by one hardcore participant during an interview. Netedgers resisted and contested the opinions of hardcore participants in the forums. As previously noted, the definition of scene became a key point of contention between the two member types. While hardcores saw the scene as a localized and objective representation of straightedge subculture, netedgers described the hardcore scene as a source of inauthenticity.

14 | -- What is Straight Edge all about?

From Nebula on 11.02.2001, 09:52 PM:

sec, you are blinded because you are doing what is "cool". Not what you want. You are expressing your views as being, "you can only be sXe if you are in the cool crowd", well I guess you're cool & I'm not. But I am sXe because of what I want.

Nebula likened the scene to the “cool crowd,” which was the antithesis of the punk/hardcore subculture. By aligning the hardcore scene with the cool crowd, Nebula set himself off as an authentic subculturalist by rejecting the idea of straightedge as a popularity contest. Rather than claim an identity based on peers’ expectations, Nebula claimed a straightedge identity grounded in personal commitment to straightedge norms. Other participants held opinions of the hardcore scene that were similar to Nebula’s:

15 | -- involved in the scene?

From Georg on 11.12.2002, 08:01 PM:

I hate scenes.

although I do book shows, own a company that does Merch for bands and I help as a promoter. and I am kind of in a band, I hate scenesters. I hate scenes. I hate scene drama. I hate that there is a hierarchy within the scene, almost like a cast system. I hate everything having to do with them.

But I love punk rock and hardcore. and I guess I am a part of a scene.

scenesters are so wrapped up in the scene that they forget important things. The world is falling apart and somewhere there is a kid worried because the scene looks bad. so fuck scenes.

Georg likened the scene to the “cool crowd” that Nebula mentioned. Scenes and scenesters for Georg were hierarchical and exclusive – in short, they demonstrated mainstream, anti-punk/hardcore values (“The world is falling apart and somewhere there is a kid worried because the scene looks bad”). A difference was drawn between the scene and its proto-typical constituent, the “scenester” or “scene elite.” The scene was a neutral medium for subcultural participation. The scenester label represented hardcore scene participants’ shallowness.

Other participants drew distinctions between scenes and scenesters. In the post below (a reply in part to Georg's post above), xcigx describes scenes as subcultural spaces from which both negative and positive outcomes could emerge, and separates scenesters from those who want "to help out and have a good time."

16 From xcigx on 11.12.2002, 08:06 PM:

Theres a difference between being involved and helping out the scene, and being a scenester. [...] I totally agree with that statement about hxc/punk and sxe going hand in hand, and I want to put my money where my mouth is.

I've only really been going to hxc shows for just over six months (I went to punk ones before that). And a lot of the time, I find hxc shows intimidating cos they're full of scenester jerks. [...]

Scenesters are totally the opposite of those people who are part of the scene to help out and have a good time.

Scenesters are people who want to look cool, I'm not sure how they achieve being cool by being in the scene, but thats up to them.

Scenesters are people who are ill-informed about a lot of things, and the sxe scenesters are always the ones down at the bar.

There is a difference.

The scene was not the problem. Rather the people involved in local scenes could make them either positive or negative; they could help build a positive social atmosphere for hardcore and straightedge youth, or they could become wrapped up in the daily "drama" and forget what was really important. xcigx further suggested that "scenesters are always the ones down at the bar," thereby delegitimizing their authenticity as straightedgers because they violated subcultural norms.

Criticism of scenesters was used by netedgers as a wedge to open up the subculture to re-evaluation by forum participants, with emphasis on their belief that straightedge was changing, and that this change was necessary for the subculture's survival. In Extract (6), XdoitdoitX drew attention to what he saw as an assumption within the straightedge subculture, namely that hardcore forum participants tended to assume that other participants belonged to f2f hardcore



scenes. He then countered this assumption by pointing to the Internet as an alternative straightedge resource, and noted that individuals from outside the hardcore scene were bound to be interested in the subculture because of its positive attributes. He further hinted at the idea that straightedge was no longer bound exclusively to hardcore (“sure, that’s where straightedge came from, but...”). This statement implicitly offered an alternative to the hardcore perspective of straightedge that could be understood as a natural evolution of the subculture.

In the following thread post, another forum participant similarly questions the necessity of the hardcore-straightedge bond.

17 +---Topic: sick of it

Posted by: Galactik on [August 2001]

ok, i might stir up some things here but before i speak, i'll add a disclaimer. i am sXe. i am friends with many "punks" and i love most of em to death. but i only know 2 punks who are straightedge. anyhoo, the sXe punks i've talked to online are assholes! they preach about how sXe IS life and if you aren't, you're scum. i happen to be very open minded towards a lot of things, and although i am a tad curious about drugs i chose not to succumb to that way of living. people now think that if you even listen to techno/trance you are automatically out of the sXe loop or something. it's like in order to be sXe, you HAVE to be a punk, listen to punk music and be a total ass about it! a lot of punks these days are such snobs, and it's really getting to me.

Whereas XdoitdoitX’s statement about straightedge and the Internet appeared as an attempt to resist a hardcore definition of straightedge, Galactik’s statement seemed an outright rejection. In the opening line s/he stated, “I am sXe,” thereby staking a claim for an authentic straightedge self. S/He then criticized the idea that “in order to be sXe, you HAVE to be a punk, listen to punk music.” Many straightedge scenesters were characterized as exclusivist and snobbish towards non-punks. This designation parallels that of “scene elites” given to hardcore participants by a non-hardcore interviewee.

In the above posts, non-hardcore participants took a serious tone when discussing the relationship between straightedge and music. They made observations about subcultural configurations that potentially excluded non-hardcore participants and worked to explain why and how straightedge was changing to incorporate non-hardcore participants. Other forum participants discussed the possibility for a non-hardcore straightedge identity through joking about music. In the following thread, several forum participants conversed about bands they liked to listen to and how pro-drug bands' lyrics failed to influence them to stray from straightedge norms. Through such discourse, netedgers further attempted to separate straightedge identity from music.

18 +---what if on [August 2001]

Posted by: Marmalade

can i be sXe and listen to 311 [the music band] there always talking about weed

Posted by: XmikeXsXe on [August 2001]

Yes. Although some people will tell you that may amke you want to smoke weed, but don't think that is true.

Posted by: Marmalade on [August 2001]

good b/c 311 is super rad !

Posted by: 847jeff on [August 2001]

yeah you can. i listen to stuff that talks about drugs. it's like saying you can't be sxe and have friends that do drugs..

Posted by: subway on [August 2001]

i'm a big fan of minor threat. does that prove anything?

Posted by: Xpersonalx on [August 2001]

u can still be sXe but u should be shot cuz [311] really suck!!

Posted by: xhtrox on [August 2001]

haha, yeah 311 does suck but that's your choice. you can still be straight edge and listen to whatever the ##### you want.

Posted by: x0x on [August 2001]

YEah i'm just got in "D12" and they rap about drugs and shit but i'm not going to do it because they are or say to!

Posted by: XxbrittanyxX on [August 2001]

hey, my favorite band is alkaline trio and they are always talking about passing out. but i still enjoy there music. you can still be straight edge even if u don't listen to minor threat 24/7. just as long as you follow the rules, that's all the counts. music has nothing to do with it...

Posted by: Apple on [August 2001]

hehe... 311 is definitley not my favorite.

"Am I still sXe if..." Know what? YOu determine the meaning of yr Xes. If someone tries to tell you otherwise, he/she's an ass. And asses smell bad.

Marmalade asked other forum participant's about the appropriateness of listening to non-straightedge, non-hardcore music. The respondents claimed that music preference was not a defining aspect of the straightedge subculture. Several posters noted their appreciation of bands that embraced drug use, including 311, Dr. Dre, Kottonmouth Kings, Alkaline Trio, and Papa Roach. As xhtrox noted, one could listen to whatever music they enjoyed and remain straightedge. This was reiterated by another poster who claimed, "just as long as you follow the rules, that's all [that] counts." Apple supported these assertions when he stated that individuals should determine the meaning of their own relationship to straightedge and not be swayed by what others had to say. Subway, who came to be respected by many in the Straight Edge Discussion forum, even though he was a leisure-time drug user, further problematized the relationship between straightedge and music when he commented, "I'm a big fan of Minor Threat. Does that prove anything?" If Subway could use drugs recreationally and enjoy straightedge music, then the importance of the music required further clarification.

Among some of the non-hardcore participants I interviewed, there was the belief that straightedge was a positive youth subculture which was limited by its association with punk/hardcore.

**Nori Aoki:** I think it would be a great thing if the edge movement could cut loose from the punk thing and become more inclusive to people like me, who aren't in it for the music.

**Patrick:** do you think people online would like that possibility? on the forums now, i mean?

**Nori Aoki:** [...] Some people would love it. Me, for one. It's an openminded thing. But you saw how people are fighting with [a participant] about whether ravers can say they're sXe. So some people would go up in flames about it. "It's punk only, blahblahblah."

Even Nori Aoki, who was an active forum participant for only a very short time was quite aware of the divisions that existed between forum participants. Similar feelings were voiced by other participants in threads.

19 | -- considering...

From listen... on 11.13.2002, 03:38 AM:

i'm considering dropping the sxe label. i know most kids here think i'm scene enough to keep it, but i don't know if i want to anymore. i just say this because i would like to make it clear that i am not dropping it because of other people telling me i'm not sxe. if they did, it'd just give me more incentive to keep it, heh. just looking at all the different threads floating around about the scene and how you need to be a part of it to be sxe and all that, i don't know if i want to be a part of this movement. it isn't fun or positive anymore, it's just a bunch of people arguing over what it is, and that's all i think it ever was now that i reflect back on it.

everyone thinks they know what sxe is, and everyone's take on it is a little bit different. i think it's lost its meaning in the process. i think i'm starting to feel weighed down by the label now...like it's saying more negative things about me than positive...

Like Nori Aoki above, listen... believed that straightedge would remain limited and ineffective as a positive youth subculture if it remained tied to the hardcore music scene. Their remarks were similar to the concerns raised by other netedgers about the links between straightedge and hardcore. More broadly, listen... was voicing

her/his concern over the distinction between individual's interpretations of the subculture. First, s/he noted, "everyone's take on it is a little bit different," highlighting how each individual had her/his own frame of reference. S/He also claimed that straightedge scenes (both on and offline) were little more than "just a bunch of people arguing over what it is," thereby bringing to the foreground the everyday contestations over authenticity.

*The alternative: drug free*

Beyond the debate over authentic straightedge identity between hardcore scenesters and netedgers, a third category of forum participants emerged during my research – individuals who identified as, or were labeled, "drug free" or "poison free." These terms were typically either used by individuals who claimed to follow straightedge rules, or by hardcore straightedgers as a way of excluding non-hardcore participants from subcultural membership. I analyzed threads in which people used the term to self-identify, as well as threads where people used it to label others, to understand the different ways in which the drug free identity was used.

One hardcore participant claimed that drug free participants were "straight but not edge." The drug free identity included no explicit statement about sexual activity, yet drug free forum participants seemed to also follow an anti-promiscuity philosophy. What made some of the drug free participants stand out (besides the label) was their acknowledgement that their lack of participation in the punk/hardcore music scenes made them different from authentic straightedgers. Drug free participants sided with hardcore participants concerning the links between straightedge and punk/hardcore music. Some participants reported never

having made claims to the straightedge identity, while other reported changing from self-identifying as straightedge to self-identifying as drug free. During an interview, one drug free participant explained how and why he gave up straightedge identity:

**ThreeSixNine:** I found out, while there is debate, that the "scene" of going to hardcore/punk shows and being a participant in the scene is a HUGE part of what being straightedge is all about. well, i wasn't part of the scene. therefore, while I have the "rules" of being drug free, I don't have that other "scene" aspect of being edge.

**Patrick:** i see. so how long did you think the term straightedge applied to you?

**ThreeSixNine:** about 6 months probably. [HC-sXer 1] from [another straightedge web forum] and [HC-sXer 2] were probably the most instrumental in my acknowledging of this, because I was "one of those kids" who said "scene doesn't matter", it's about the lifestyle. but then i had to face that I just wanted the "cool" name of straightedge. and I was co-opting the term for my own use.

**Patrick:** You say "but then i had to face that I just wanted the "cool" name of straightedge". When you say FACE it sounds like you were talked into believing it even though you wanted to resist.... Were you convinced by people like [HC-sXer 1] and [HC-sXer 2] that you weren't straightedge?

**ThreeSixNine:** not initially. well, i was arguing that the scene didn't matter with them. and so i was resisting what they had to say, of course. but then i thought hard about what they said. and I realized after many more conversations that they were right. and it doesn't really matter, if I say the lifestyle is all that matters, i should be able to reject the straightedge term and use the more accurate term, drug free.

ThreeSixNine explained that, while he once thought he was straightedge, a couple of hardcore straightedgers influenced him to drop the identity. This did not mean that ThreeSixNine was not welcome in the online forum, rather it meant that he began to identify himself as explicitly non-straightedge. Ironically, he became a rather fierce advocate against non-hardcore participants claiming straightedge identity after dropping the identity himself, and regularly criticized non-hardcore participants' lobbies for a broader definition.

At other times, forum participants were labeled as being drug free despite their rejection of the term. Such labeling represented battling over the right to authentic straightedge identity, as the following thread excerpt indicates.

20 | -- What is Straight Edge all about?

From amalek on 11.01.2001, 11:35 PM:

music may have 'spawned' straight edge, but i believe straight edge is fully independant from any musical 'scene'. besides, i don't listen to punk rock.

From xantagx on 11.01.2001, 11:58 PM:

then what's the difference between straight edge and drug free? straight edge can't be independent of the music. it's a subculture centered around a style of music. you take away the music, you take away the subculture, and all you have left is a bunch of drug free kids.

From amalek on 11.02.2001, 02:20 AM:

the difference between straight edge and drug free is that straight edge is a philosophy, a lifestyle. drug free is just a physical/mental state. drug free can just be said free of drugs.

From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 02:24 AM:

and part of that lifestyle is hardcore music. without it. you're just someone that is drug free.

From Augusta on 11.02.2001, 02:58 AM:

[...] if your drug free, your not nessesarily stright edge.

amalek<sup>24</sup> claimed to be straightedge while rejecting the hardcore aspects of straightedge identity. When questioned by xantagx about the differences between straightedge and drug free, amalek described straightedge as being “lifestyle,” versus drug free being a “physical/mental state.” In subsequent posts he went on to explain that even drug addicts could be drug free when not using drugs and thus

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<sup>24</sup> I noticed that after the Straight Edge BBS crashed and was rebuilt in September 2001 (which required all participants to re-join as new members), amalek dropped the Xs from his username (he had been xamalekx previously). Here was someone who argued regularly for his rights as an individual to claim the straightedge label, yet had distanced himself within the forum by removing the Xs. I interpret this as another form of resistance to the exclusivity demonstrated by hardcore participants online. Rather than give up the straightedge label, dropping the Xs could be seen as an alternative claim to individual authenticity. By removing the ‘X’s but remaining an active and vocal forum member, amalek rejected the stylistic aspects of the subculture and instead let his posts discursively express his subcultural identity.

drug free was inadequate to describe a lifestyle choice that explicitly rejected the use of drugs. Some hardcore straightedgers refused to accept drug free as equivalent to straightedge.

21 From xantagx on 11.02.2001, 09:54 PM:  
there is no sxe in the mainstream. that's the dude's point. sxe in the mainstream is "drug free" there is a distinction to be made between what is straight edge and what is drug free.

The struggle over authentic straightedge identity seemed to revolve around distinctions between mainstream versus oppositional identity. Hardcore participants worked to discourage non-hardcore participants from self-identifying as subculture participants. This work was resisted by those forum participants who maintained a strong individual straightedge identity, but was accepted by other participants who abandoned claims to straightedge identity in favor of an alternative identity.

#### The Internet as a straightedge scene

I suggested earlier that hardcore participants grounded authenticity claims in commitment to the f2f music scene, while netedgers' claims were grounded in commitment to subcultural norms. Yet, these claims were not exclusive to each member-type. Hardcores also believed in a life-long commitment to straightedge rules, but argued that this alone was not adequate to be straightedge. Non-hardcore participants also discussed the importance of a subcultural space within which to interact meaningfully with fellow subculturalists. For them, the Internet served as an alternative scene.



Some of the definitions of scene, discussed previously, were based on interaction between like-minded individuals. One hardcore participant defined the scene as “the same kids hanging out together almost every weekend and exchanging ideas [...] it is a scene, because its at least somewhat based on the fact that we have mutual interests and goals.” Another hardcore participant claimed that:

22 From brantley on 11.12.2002, 09:23 PM:  
its just about creating a posi[tive] space thats drug free and supporting it. thats all, i guess its about making a difference. small as it may be, its something you know?

These two definitions came from hardcore participants who stated explicitly in the forum that netedgers were not “really straightedge.” Yet, they and other hardcore participants understood the scene in terms of their own experiences in f2f straightedge subculture, and failed to appreciate how their definitions were open to broad interpretation. I observed that most netedgers in the forum, as well as some hardcore participants, felt that the Internet was a place where straightedgers could come to be together *as* straightedgers.

23 -- So how do you hardcore kids feel about supporting this site?  
From xxxwah~~ on 11.11.2002, 06:57 PM:  
[...] The fact that this site spreads [straightedge] idealisms and that it may help people in realising the drugs/alcahol are not a part of everyday life is also great. No matter who runs it.

These participants believed that the Internet forum constituted a cyber-scene. In the following thread, TheMan asks hardcore participants to seriously consider their use of a website that was created and maintained by a self-identifying netedger.

24 |-- So how do you hardcore kids feel about supporting this site?  
From TheMan on 11.11.2002, 04:34 PM:  
So how do you hardcore kids feel about supporting this site? [...] After seeing yet another thread discussing how people who aren't in the hardcore scene, and only the hardcore scene (and until death do us part, so help me god), a thought came to mind.

How do you people feel about posting on a straight edge site, that is run and owned by a person that claims to be straight edge, and yet is not in the hardcore scene?

How do you feel about the fact that by posting on this site, you are supporting a site and a belief that implies that straight edge should not be limited to hardcore?

What are your thoughts about the fact that what's said on this site about straight edge, is read by thousands of people every month; and these people can then be influenced (from the writings on this site) into thinking that straight edge is about no drugs/drinking/fucking and has deep roots in hardcore, but is not tied down to that. [...]

If thousands of people come to this site, and leave with the belief that straight edge shouldn't be restricted to hardcore, doesn't that suggest that whether you like it or not, straight edge can't possibly be restricted to hardcore any more? (Thanks to me, and your support of this site?)

From brantley on 11.12.2002, 12:02 AM:

yo TheMan.

bro. you know how i feel about edge and the scene. that's just me it ain't personal, but seriously. If you aren't scene or helping create a scene you are not edge.

BUT, this is a random view, and out on a limb, you are creating a scene online by running this site, so technically that therefore does make you edge, if you follow my drift.

BUT in real life man, you went to a hxc show x'ed up and were like this music sucks, you may catch a beat down dude.

From listen... on 11.12.2002, 10:55 PM:

[...] music is transient. hardcore will eventually warp into other forms of music and fade from existence, whether you like to believe it or not. that doesn't mean it will disappear forever or anything like that, just that less and less new hardcore bands will emerge and it will become a thing of the past. so once the music is gone, does that mean you hardcore scenesters want sxe and all of its ideals gone with it?

sxe is a positive movement that could influence SO many people for the better. just because hardcore fades off after some time, i don't think sxe should have to go with it. it has helped so many people change their lives for the better. that, to me, is a LOT more important than your stupid scene. be a human first and a scene kid next.

maybe you think that's great but you still don't think they should call themselves sxe. well i say who gives a damn? obviously the sxe label helped them out, so for fuck's sake... let them have it!

if the internet can provide that, then i think that's great. i know i found out about sxe one way and someone else found out about it another way, etc. and this is just yet another way of doing it. it opens up the barrier a little bit. if you don't like how it does that, then i don't know why you would sign up here and support its occurrence, which is what i think TheMan was getting at.

From xcigx on 11.13.2002, 02:12 AM:

TheMan seems to do his bit for the scene by running this site. No one's knocking him.

TheMan and I had previously chatted on IM about the idea of the Internet as an alternative to the straightedge scene. Extract (24) shows a message he posted, calling on hardcore participants to critically evaluate their support of a forum created explicitly to extend the boundaries of straightedge beyond hardcore.

brantley expressed some level of agreement that the forum constituted a scene, as did xcigx, yet there was still a line drawn that separated the Internet scene from a “real life” scene, where TheMan would likely “catch a beat down” if he disrespected straightedge music. Others were less concerned with comparing Internet and f2f scenes, focusing instead on subcultural change. Listen..., for example, talked about the inevitability of change within the hardcore scene and argued that straightedge had to adapt if it was to outlive its hardcore parent culture. She reiterated the idea that hardcore music itself was conjunctural, that straightedge had the ability to change beyond its origin, and that the Internet was a part of that process.

Like TheMan, other netedgers also reported learning about straightedge from the Internet. PunkRockBob, for example, said that he researched the term straightedge after he heard about it from a schoolmate: “my main source of info was the internet cos no one else i no [sic] knows anything about it really, the specifics of it.” Similarly, Nori Aoki related to me how, although she knew some punk straightedgers in the f2f world, most of her information and communication about straightedge came from the Straight Edge Discussion forum. Yet another posted: “I was told about sXe by a cyber goth friend.” All the netedgers I interviewed shared very similar stories of hearing the word straightedge, whether through friends, TV,

or magazines, but gaining most of their information directly from Internet sites.

Nebula summed up the thoughts of many participants during an interview.

**Nebula:** By the time I had gotten on the net, I had already a good understanding of what straight-edge was, but the opinion's of people on forums did give me a good deal of information on what other people took straight-edge as. [...] I do not think it is wrong if someone learns about straight-edge over the internet.

**Patrick:** I understand what you mean....

**Nebula:** [...] It is better that someone learn about the positive lifestyle off of the internet than not learn about it at all.

**Patrick:** How important is the Internet to you in terms of being a part of straightedge?

**Nebula:** I think the internet is a good means by which to discuss my opinion of straight-edge & drug-free when I am not around my friends. Through this discussion I am able to find more about my own opinion of the culture(s) & the opinion of others.

Perhaps most interesting was that some of my hardcore interviewees also reported relying on the Internet for knowledge about straightedge. I had assumed early on that hardcore straightedgers got their information about the subculture from the f2f world and used the Internet only to supplement their f2f participation in local scenes, but my assumption proved incorrect. When I asked SubPush, a hardcore music scene participant for nearly a decade, about any role the Internet had played for him as a straightedger, he said that early on, "a few of us went on the internet and probably looked up straightedge a few times" to learn more about it. Other hardcores reported using the Internet as a source for subcultural information as well.

**xHCgrrrlx:** i read this article in this "teen" magazine they used to put in the newspaper...anyway...they had an article on [straightedge] and i was like "hey..i don't do drugs, i don't drink...hmmmm" and then i researched a little on the internet and started x-ing up. i didn't even really know about the music until way later."

In both examples we see how the Internet served as an information source for individuals who either were, or would later become, hardcore straightedgers. Whether individuals were participants of f2f straightedge scenes or relied solely on the Internet for subcultural participation, the Internet was discussed as a resource.

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed how music was theorized as producing subcultures rather than being products of them. By replacing the word *music* with *Internet*, we find a statement that is equally true for many forum participants. To adapt Cushman (1996), the Internet “is not simply a static cultural object...but...is used for the formation of new forms of individual and collective identity.” Similarly, Frith’s (1996) words help us understand that “the issue is not how [the Internet] reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates an experience....” Much like hardcore/punk music has created an experience for straightedgers over the last 20 years, the Straight Edge Discussion forum creates an experience for a new generation of straightedgers on the Internet.

The differences that exist among participants are similar to differences that occur in many subcultures. This is commonly referred to by subculturalists as “old school” versus “new school.” Old schoolers are those whose authenticity is tied to their following original subcultural iterations, and they commonly view newer participants as trend-followers (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990). New schoolers are those who introduce new elements to the subculture and are less willing to tread perfectly in predecessors’ footsteps. The old versus new dichotomy was represented in the forums by conflicts over real versus fake straightedge identity. Each type of

forum participant was able to express her/his subcultural authenticity, while noting others' shortcomings.

### Summary

The quality and quantity of debates concerning the differences among hardcore straightedgers, netedgers, and drug free participant represents to some extent how the Internet influenced the straightedge subculture. The predominance of music in the straightedge subculture has been assumed in past social scientific research (Allan and Kidder 2000; Christensen 1999; Haenfler 2002; Irwin 1999; Pileggi 1998; Tyler 1997; Wood 1999; 2001). All of the above scholarly literature assumes the centrality of music in their analyses of straightedge. In the online forum, the centrality of music was repeatedly resisted or rejected by most non-hardcore participants. This resistance was linked to the idea of an authentic subcultural identity. By developing alternative paths to authentic selfhood, individuals who did not meet pre-existing subcultural criteria had to ability to achieve subcultural membership. This membership seemed to provide participants with a positive sense of self – whether by being part of a positive youth subculture or movement, or by making a personal commitment to following subcultural rules for a healthy lifestyle.

I have not tried to arrive at a conclusion regarding the relative authenticity of forum participants' identities, because doing so would deny the discursive activation of subcultural identities I have just highlighted. Instead, I have been interested in developing a picture of how participants struggled with defining themselves and others as (in)authentic, and with how successful identification and self-identification claims were. My analysis suggests that participants' knowledge of

straightedge's history, combined with idiosyncratic constructions of key subcultural terms such as "scene," allowed them to argue for other participants' inclusion in or exclusion from the straightedge subculture. These strategies have been previously called the "being" versus "doing" dichotomy in social psychology (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990, 1995). Authentic participants claim to "be" real participant while charging others with simply "doing" subcultural things as an attempt to be cool or fit in. Participants from all sides made this distinction in the forum.

In cultural terms, the being versus doing distinction refers to participants' struggles over subcultural capital (Thornton 1995). Capital was measured objectively (producing/consuming straightedge music and merchandise), as well as in embodied terms (being 'in the know' about the scene, having friends in bands, following straightedge rules). Participants from each member-type attempted to show how they *were* authentic subculturalists while marginalizing the subcultural capital of others. The traditional measurement of subcultural capital within straightedge appeared to be through promoting straightedge in local punk/hardcore music scenes, what one netedger facetiously called "the scenester point system." Earlier I explained how I claimed straightedge as a teenager but rarely had the opportunity to communicate with other self-identifying straightedgers. The growth of Internet-based participants further confounds the idea of a f2f scene as necessary because it has allowed more individuals who are disconnected from local punk/hardcore music scenes to interact daily within the subculture. One participant seemed to understand the opening up of "scene" when he argued that "even popping up on the Internet" counted as some level of participation within the subculture. For the case under investigation, straightedge is

undergoing a noticeable shift in who has access to the subculture and how those people affiliate with it. For the non-hardcore participants, we saw that subcultural capital was measured not as affiliation with a f2f scene, but through personal commitment to the straightedge rules. Netedgers and hardcore participants alike regularly found that their capital was worth little in trade with participants from the opposing side.

In his ethnography of hardcore straightedgers, Darrell Irwin (1999) claimed that straightedge “may be viewed as a fascinating movement away from the drug scene” and that “the values promulgated by this subculture may subject the larger youth culture to re-evaluation and change” (p. 367). The data provided in this chapter imply that Irwin’s claim has only partially played out. The Internet has provided sources of information and new social spaces within which youth from outside the punk subculture have come to self-identify as straightedge. Such youth evaluated their own positions within youth (drug) culture and decided to claim a contrasting, abstinent identity. The influx of youth from outside the punk/hardcore music subculture has not gone unchallenged. The unwillingness of many hardcore straightedgers to accept netedgers as authentic participants can be related to the concept of “parent culture” as used in cultural studies. Clarke et al. (1976) conceptualize subcultures as emerging from a parent culture, both of which stand against a so-called dominant culture. In the data presented above, we can see how hardcore straightedgers linked their subcultural selves to the original iteration of straightedge in early 1980s Washington D.C. by tracing their hardcore music lineage. Hardcore participants saw themselves as reacting against the mainstream in the same ways as the earliest straightedgers did. Netedgers, on the other hand,



did not articulate a cohesive link between themselves and early straightedge subculture. They expressed personal commitment to straightedge norms and self-identified as straightedge, yet they did not convince hardcore straightedgers that they were more similar to hardcore participants than to grandmothers, or Mormons, or D.A.R.E. participants.

In this chapter I focused on the membership of a straightedge forum online. At its heart were the competing definitions of straightedge between hardcore and non-hardcore straightedge forum participants, which depended in turn upon the definitions of associated terms such as scene and drug free, as well as understandings of straightedge's origin and history. Given the struggle over competing definitions of straightedge identity, I propose that other aspects of the subculture are also regularly contested between participants. In the next chapter, I detail the similar instability of straightedge norms.

## CHAPTER 7

### **Straightedge continuity and change**

#### Introduction

In their interactionist thesis on subculture, Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman (1979) argued that prior theories had tended to characterize subcultures as homogeneous and static systems. Recent research has used the frame of reference concept to describe a relatively stable system of norms and beliefs that objectively represents the straightedge subculture (Wood 2000). The frame of reference is theorized as a set of norms that vary between “franchises” and over time and which offers an explanation for subcultural change through schisms.

While Wood’s concept of subcultural schism takes heterogeneity into account, other research on straightedge has taken straightedge norms and beliefs for granted as meaning the same thing to all participants (e.g., Irwin 1999). There is to date no published analysis of how straightedgers understand or express subcultural norms. My analysis of the Straight Edge Discussion forum, on the contrary, supports Fine and Kleinman’s (1979) assertion that subcultures are in a state of perpetual flux that arises from “each member’s perspective on the shared knowledge of the subculture [which] will necessarily be different from that of any other member” (Fine and Kleinman 1979:6). This chapter shows how there are as many straightedge frames of reference as there are online participants.

The goal of this chapter is to answer Research Question 4: what can research on an Internet forum uncover about how participants express their individual interpretations of straightedge norms? Through my analysis, I will demonstrate how the Internet serves as a medium for the transmission of subcultural knowledge,

norms, and beliefs, and the extent to which these cultural elements are negotiated. I first compare how forum participants write about straightedge to its original lyrical formulation by the band Minor Threat. This is followed by an analysis of how forum participants construct individual frames of reference that neutralize their own behaviors, and how they communicate these to others. I argue that the Internet facilitates the wide divergence between subcultural perspectives and allows the subculture to be experienced as both a relatively stable yet heterogeneous phenomenon. This chapter relies on content analysis of the forum, focused discussions and in-depth interviews.

#### The stability of straightedge subculture

In Chapter 4 I sketched out a preliminary map of the straightedge subculture through analysis of what online participants called straightedge “rules.” These behavioral norms centered around the use of drugs and sexual activity, each broadly defined. Discussions based on other norms and beliefs, including animal rights, vegetarianism and veganism, and violence occurred as well. Past research on straightedge has put forward similar beliefs and norms as defining characteristics of the subculture (Wood 1999).

In *Out of step* (Minor Threat 1981b), Ian MacKaye declared his feelings as a punk rock teenager caught in a youth culture that promoted overindulgence and that lacked focus. MacKaye described how he differed from mainstream as well as punk youth: he did not drink, smoke, or have promiscuous sex. MacKaye also described his feelings of alienation by being “out of step with the world.” The following brief biographies clarify how these same aspects – the rules combined

with feelings of alienation – are also part of the value- and belief-orientation of straightedgers in the online forum.

SubPush is 20 years old. He lives in New England and has self-identified as straightedge since he was aged thirteen. He has been an active member of a local hardcore scene all of that time. I asked him what straightedge meant to him and he replied:

**SubPush:** straightedge is a philosophy that basically says you don't have to drink, do drugs, smoke, or sleep around to be punk or hardcore. it's a way to free yourself from stereotypes and to ease your self from some of the pressures of the outside world to do things that you don't want to.

**Patrick:** do many punks and hardcore people drink/do drugs/sleep around? i mean is that pressure there a lot?

**SubPush:** [...] i think before the straightedge movement began it was seen as like almost uncanny for someone to listen to punk and not do drink or get fucked up. If i go to a show [...] people may try to put some pressure on me to drink or smoke or whatever if they didn't see that i identify with straightedge. and no that's not really a big issue to me because i'm 20 years old now. i can think for myself and don't worry what my peers think. but at the same time it wasn't always that way and i think its important to remember that. it may make it easier for younger kids [...] its important to keep the movement going so it will stay acceptable for kids to just be straight if they want to and not have a dozen kids on their case.

SubPush wrote about straightedge as a subculture within a subculture. That is, in addition to being different from mainstream youth culture, straightedgers were also different from others in the punk/hardcore music scene. Straightedgers embodied these differences by not using drugs or engaging in promiscuous activity and marked their bodies so people at music shows could “see that I identify with straightedge.” Straightedge enabled kids to maintain self-esteem in the face of peer pressure, which was articulated as having “a dozen kids on their case” if they chose not to engage in what they considered unhealthy lifestyle choices. For SubPush,

straightedge was also described in individualistic terms, allowing him to “think for myself and don’t worry what my peers think.”

PunkRockBob is an eighteen-year old British high-schooler. He is the only straightedger he knows in the f2f world. He says that many of his friends drink or smoke cigarettes, and some use illegal drugs “mildly.”

**PunkRockBob:** i see [straightedge] as a positive lifestyle choice. for me it is no drinking, no smoking, no drugs, no fucking (by this i understand sleeping around outside of a loving stable relationship with someone that you love). i was vegetarian before going straight edge but since going edge this has become more a part of my healthier lifestyle and i have also got more interested in animal rights and learned more about wot goes on. [...] i do not think that this is a part of straight edge as such but it is part of the mental state of awareness that i feel comes with being edge. also with the straight edge lifestyle comes greater awareness of politics, society and things like that. being clean it is easier to see these things going on around you and understand them and make a difference if need be. straight edge allows me to think clearly and positively when i need to. that ability is not under some other influence.

Being a part of the straightedge subculture was described as an empowering experience. PunkRockBob knew the rules of straightedge and spelled them out when I asked what straightedge meant to him. He also described other beliefs related to straightedge subculture, such as “politics” and “animal rights.”

PunkRockBob expressed how, by being straightedge, he was free from influences that might impede his ability to “think clearly and positively” or “to make a difference” when it came to social and political issues. PunkRockBob saw himself as different from most of his f2f friends, who were not straightedge, because he felt they lacked that clarity. While he felt somewhat alienated in his beliefs and values from many of his f2f peers, he believed that the Straight Edge Discussion forum offered a site for support of his beliefs and a community in which he could interact with others who shared his beliefs and personal commitments.

xHCgrrrlx is from the northwestern US and was just about to turn twenty-one at the time I interviewed her. She has been straightedge for almost seven years and is active in her local punk/hardcore scenes. When I asked her what straightedge meant to her, she seemed perplexed.

**xHCgrrrlx:** i mean, i think of what it means to me, personally, my personal definition of the term, or the general definition or how it is in the scene or i don't know! there's a million different things! like my personal edge? what i live by?

**Patrick:** haha. Yes, well tell me first your personal definition plz.

**xHCgrrrlx:** mine's probably a little different than most...i think it's more towards the historical definition... i'm pretty lax about stuff. i mean i'm VERY strict on no drinking and no illegal drugs or cigarettes but the rest...you know. i try not to have caffeine, i gave it up for awhile, but they don't make caffeine free cherry coke LOL....and i try not to take many drugs like otc [over-the-counter] or prescription but i have to sometimes.

**Patrick:** Do you think Ian MacKaye would want you to give up Coke?

**xHCgrrrlx:** no. not really. i mean, from what i understand, the original sXe was just about not having your life taken over by these poisons, you know? it got a lot stricter as the years went by.

xHCgrrrlx indicated during the interview that it was difficult for her to interpret straightedge's rules. She recognized that, in addition to idealized standard of behavior, there were various interpretations of subcultural norms at the local level ("how it is in the scene") and at the level of individual internalization ("my personal definition of the term"). While she held a relatively conservative interpretation of the rules regarding drug use (she limited her use of caffeine and OTC medicines to almost nil), she was more liberal in interpreting the meaning of the 'no sex' rule (she believed for example that sex with close friends was permissible). Still, she recognized "the historical definition" of straightedge and even had a clear idea of how songwriter Ian MacKaye felt about the meaning of straightedge compared to

current norms (“it got a lot stricter as the years went by”). Following the rules was not always easy.

**xHCgrrrlx:** I felt very alienated. i got made fun of for [being straightedge] often, and it really became an issue once i got into university. i spent many a weekend alone while all my friends went out and got trashed. now that i've just turned 21, it's again become an issue. if i get one more person asking about my "21 run" i think i'm going to punch them in the face.

In addition to feelings of alienation, it was clear that xHCgrrrlx also felt anger at having her straightedge morals questioned. Non-straightedge peers chastised her choices and believed that she would ultimately fail to remain true to her beliefs (her “21 run” referring to the fact that many straightedgers drop the label and begin drinking in college or soon after reaching legal drinking age). She believed that straightedge norms will remain important to her throughout her life.

TheMan is a twenty-year old straightedger who lives in Australia. He found out about straightedge on the Internet in a chatroom, where he was chatting anonymously about habits and lifestyles. After asking numerous questions about his drinking and smoking practices, an anonymous chat participant announced that TheMan was “in fact straightedge.” TheMan did not know precisely what the term referred to, and searched online for information. After locating and reading materials about straightedge norms and beliefs, he decided to self-identify as a member. Since then he has been active in promoting the cyber-straightedge scene, including creating the Straight Edge Discussion forum, paying its associated costs, and administering its day-to-day function. I asked TheMan what straightedge meant to him.

**TheMan:** I'd have to say the simple thought of no drugs and such is what comes to mind...

**Patrick:** ok, is it just the drug-thing for you? or is there something more? just wondering of course - obviously no right/wrong answers here...

**TheMan.** I'm sure some would claim otherwise ;-). But ah, more to it I'd have to say a basic commitment er.. or awareness perhaps, to a positive lifestyle... things like promiscuity as well, and an understanding of what straight edge is, and was.

His answer highlighted two different but important aspects of being straightedge.

First was the recognition that claiming subcultural membership meant abstaining from drug use as well promiscuous sexual activity. The issue of drugs seemed to be the most salient aspect of the subculture for him since it was the one aspect he mentioned before being probed for additional information. Second was the recognition of "what straight edge is, and was." He seemed to mean that the subculture was composed of a set of elements (e.g., music, norms) that defined its existence and could not simply be ignored. TheMan went on to write about these elements through a discussion of the difference of opinions that forum participants held based on whether or not they affiliated with the hardcore music scene.

Although he considered himself a non-hardcore straightedger, he claimed that it was necessary to know what straightedge was about before one could authentically identify with the subculture. Specifically, he saw straightedge in contrast to a larger youth culture that "just generally seems focused on well... getting drunk, having sex, and doing drugs... blindly following what is accepted, and trends." It was as a result of feeling alienated because he avoided such behaviors that he chose to identify as straightedge.

Other interviewees provided similar descriptions, though each offered a unique interpretation based on her/his experiences before and after becoming straightedge. As the above interview data indicate, the straightedge subculture has remained



grounded in the same types of ethical, value-laden issues that characterized its origin. Drug use and sexual activity remained focal concerns for Straight Edge Discussion forum members in their descriptions of what straightedge meant to them. An emphasis on straightedge rules combined with feelings of being an outsider were found in all interviews regardless of whether the participant had ever been part of a hardcore music scene. Further, all interviewees reported some positive effects on self that accompanied self-identification. Interview data thus suggest long-term stability of straightedge norms and beliefs and that straightedgers who relied solely on the Internet for subcultural affiliation were able to communicate knowledge of core subcultural elements.

#### Heterogeneity within the straightedge subculture

Analysis of the online forum revealed a much more diverse range of interpretations than participants articulated during interviews. We can now consider how Straight Edge Discussion forum members articulated their own perspectives of straightedge norms and beliefs in everyday cyber-interaction with other forum participants. It is suggested that various, individualistic articulations of subcultural norms are used either as neutralizations (Sykes and Matza 1957) or as justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968) for behavior that diverge from ideal straightedge norms.<sup>25</sup> Through this analysis the heterogeneity of the subculture becomes evident.

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<sup>25</sup> Neutralizations are theorized as occurring before a deviant behavior, while justifications are theorized as occurring after deviant behavior. Because I analyze posts without knowledge of whether individuals have already engaged in activities about which they write, it is not possible to ascertain when posts occur relative to behavior. I therefore argue that posts may serve to either neutralize or justify behavior.

Forum participants seemed well aware of the variety of value-and belief-orientations to rules, as the following demonstrates. Nebula started a thread asking for participants to define straightedge, paying specific attention to defining the individual concepts that made up their definition. Over a six-day period a total of sixty-seven messages were posted to the thread.

1 | -- Straight-Edge

From Nebula on 02.14.2002, 08:07 PM:

I want to try something.

What is straight-edge? In your answer, make sure to state definitions of every word you are using, such as "drug", "sex", "love", "promiscuous", etc.

In the thread root Nebula asked participants to answer the question, “what is straight-edge?” Nebula stated in the post that he would refrain from answering until other participants had a chance to do so. Nebula gave away what he considered the most salient rules by referencing “drug,” “sex,” and “promiscuous.” Nebula ended his example with “etc.,” indicating his awareness that others participants might include additional rules, yet it appeared that drugs and sex were most obvious to him.

2 | From XxsupposeX on 02.14.2002, 08:46 PM:

My straight edge means no drugs not perscribed to me by a doctor, no alcohol, no premarital sex (including bj's and the like), no gambling, no porn, and no masterbation. I like to think of it as cleansing myself from not only bodily poisons, but social poisons as well.

The first respondent, XxsupposeX, defined straightedge in terms of drugs, sex, and gambling. S/He described being straightedge as a process of “cleansing myself” from “bodily” and “social poisons.” Drugs that her/his straightedge frame rejected were any not prescribed by a physician and alcohol, which was a relatively ambiguous definition. The forms of sex that s/he believed were inappropriate for

straightedgers included premarital and oral sex, consuming pornography, and masturbation.

The next participant to respond defined her/his edge in five parts: no drugs, no casual sex, no alcohol, no tobacco, and no violence.

3 From Magic on 02.14.2002, 09:04 PM:

My straight edge definitions

No drugs- no organically synthesized substance that is not given to me by a health professional, as well as naturally occurring ones that can cause a altered state of consciousness, especially hallucinations and delusions.

No casual sex - no sexual activities with different people on a regular basis for the sake of getting laid. This also includes random one night hook ups. I feel I also have to have a complete sense of trust in a person before I get physical with them

No alcohol - no alcohol that is made and sold in a liquor aisle, generally consumed by kids

here for the purpose of getting wasted. Alcohol in food is acceptable.

no tobacco of any type

no violence - violence is anything that could cause emotional, mental, and/or physical harm to a person. This also ties in with PLUR. PLUR stands for the values of peace, love, unity, and respect, which one much exhibit externally to others, as well as internally to oneself.

This second definition did not include a rule against gambling, but instead contained a rule against violence and explicitly named tobacco as a prohibited substance. Further, its author spelled out in more detail the rule regarding sex. S/He added the term “casual,” implying that some sexual activity (i.e., non-casual sex) was permissible.

The next post also took up the notion of being in a relationship as an acceptable condition for having sex: “no sex with people you don’t care about.”

4 From frisbee on 02.14.2002, 09:46 PM:

In my opinion it is no sex with people that you don't care about, no drugs unless for medicinal purposes, no drinking alcohol unless by accident, and no tobacco.

frisbee also described that under certain circumstances drugs were permissible, such as when used “for medicinal purposes” or when ingested “by accident.” Other

straightedgers agreed that taking drugs to satisfy addictions was wrong, but medicines used to treat specific conditions were acceptable. The next post focused on “drugs,” “alcohol” and “casual sex.” Its author informed other participants that alcohol, expressed separately from drugs, was not allowed if the product was “found in the liquor part of the store,” but was permissible if found as an ingredient in medicine or food. Also, sex not grounded in a long-term relationship was considered wrong.

5 From karmen on 02.14.2002, 10:49 PM:

This is straight edge to me:

No drugs: No illegal drugs, no drugs taken only because you feel an addiction. No drugs taken to feel a high. Medical drugs are fine, if you truly have medical conditions in need of medication.

No alcohol: No alcohol found in the liquor part of the store. (cough syrup and wine favored spaghetti sauce are fine.)

No casual sex: NO one night stands with sexual contact of "any" kind. NO sexual contact with anyone you don't plan on staying with.

Extract (1-5) shared some agreement as to subcultural rules, but only at a superficial level. Individuals brought personal perspectives on straightedge rules to their definitions. Their interpretations were shaped by various forces, including interaction with other forum participants, individuals and media outside the forums, and individuals positioned in “structural roles” (Fine and Kleinman 1979: 11) as the following post shows.

6 +---Topic: Question about lifestyle

Posted by: Fishy on [May 2001]

[...] I abstain from drugs, alcohol, tobacco and promiscuous sex (although that last one isn't always a choice ) But the other night at a concert the lead singer was straight edge and I got into a discussion and he claimed that straight edge also meant no masterbation and no SWEARING.

Individuals outside of the Internet forum thus influenced how forum participants articulated their understandings of normative boundaries.

Beyond the ubiquitous 'no drugs' and 'no sex' rules, participants added rules based. These included 'no violence,' 'no meat,' and 'must be hardcore.'

7 From Gloom on 02.17.2002, 12:38 AM:  
No violence unless the situation truly calls for it(i.e. self defense.)  
Vegetarianism/Veganism- This just goes along with it for me.

From SubPush on 02.18.2002, 02:27 AM:  
i also think the "edge" part implies that you are generally thoughtful and aware of your surroundings and being involved with the hardcore and or punk scene.

From XMoriceX on 02.18.2002, 06:29 PM:  
No alcohol. No drugs. No cigarettes. No fucking (there is a difference between having sex and fucking... you figure it out). You also should know something about the origin of straight edge and the hardcore scene.

Posts about the meaning of straightedge brought many diverse frames together, which participants read and thus considered when articulating their own definitions. Rules concerning drug use and sex were similar to some degree – the focus seemed to be placed on the inappropriateness of recreational drug usage and promiscuous sexual activity. Yet underneath this could be seen unique interpretations based on lived experience. Individuals involved in f2f straightedge scenes were more likely to include knowledge of or involvement in a hardcore music scene as a rule. A variety of other norms and beliefs were also activated in interaction.

### *Drugs*

The most salient concern among straightedgers in the forum was drug use. Participants wrote about drugs' physical and psychological effects on the body and mind of individuals, as well as their social effects on peers, families and society. Various drugs were discussed on a regular basis. I divide these into four types:

restricted; prescribed; illegal; and legal substances. How individuals oriented toward these various types of drugs were diverse. All straightedgers seemed to agree that any type of illegal drug usage went against subcultural norms and beliefs. Examples of illegal drugs given included marijuana, ecstasy, speed, cocaine, and heroine. Other drugs provoked disagreement about definitions, and whether their use violated straightedge rules.

Restricted drugs refers to alcohol and tobacco because they are legal only to certain segments of the population, e.g., individuals over a legal age limit. Forum participants reported a wide range of situations in which they were confronted with restricted drugs. Straightedgers typically framed discussions about restricted drugs by leisure practices and health issues. In the following post, zepel framed her/his decision to stop drinking alcohol in both leisure and health terms. S/He first stopped drinking for medical reasons and subsequently admitted that her/his recreational use of alcohol was also unhealthy.

8 +---Topic: Why are you sXe?

Posted by: zepel on [September 2001]

[...] I stopped drinking because of medications, and then realized how common alcohol is in the lives of 20 year olds (up in Canada where the legal age is 19) and I really dont like that. It seems there is nothing we do anymore that you don't need to be "of age" to do. I mean where was I the last 19 years? what did I do? where did i hang out? the sad thing is I dont even remember I've wasted too much money and forgotten too many nights and I've puked too much; and I just dont want anything to do with that shit anymore.

Various forum participants brought together issues of leisure and health. One female forum participant for example asserted that many people “need alcohol in order to achieve ‘peace’ or ‘relaxation’ after work” and that this was particularly dangerous for women, who “lack that particular enzyme that breaks down alcohol” and who “get depressed.. then drink to get rid of that depression.. which only

addicts them further and depresses them further” (Posted by: berg). Leisurely use of drugs was in this way linked to health problems. Such posts seemed to be intended as factual information for other straightedgers to consider when defining their own straightedge frame of reference.

Other participants shared concerns about the health risks associated with alcohol. Foods cooked with alcohol was a topic that was often discussed.

9 +---Topic: strawberry ice cream cake.

Posted by: Smooth on [September 2001]

I was just wondering how people feel about eating food that has been cooked with wine, and brandy etc. I know that the alcohol itself isn't present after cooking, but why would you want the taste in your food anyways?

Smooth called into question eating any foods cooked with alcohol. S/He suggested that, regardless of the alcohol content of the prepared food, a straightedger should not want even want to experience the associated taste of alcohol, which was construed as inappropriate behavior. Other straightedgers disagreed. In posts about the definition of straightedge, one participant wrote that, “having wine with dinner, etc., unless for health reasons. alcohol in cooking, mouthwash, etc is acceptable” (Posted by: xHCgrrrlx on 02.15.2002, 01:07 AM). Another participant considered “foods that have been cooked with alcohol (e.g. pasta cooked with wine) acceptable. I do NOT consider drinking alcohol for medicinal purposes acceptable” (Posted by: Tigger... on 02.15.2002, 12:06 PM). For still other straightedgers, no alcohol meant “no beer, wine, vodka, etc. it's fine for people to cook with these products, and i think the whole "red wine" issue is really up to the person.. if you drink a glass of wine with a meal i'm not gonna say you're not edge though like i said i wouldn't do it myself” (Posted by: SubPush on 02.18.2002, 02:27 AM).

Alcohol, which represented only one part of the ‘no drug rule,’ was a symbol that held many different meanings in the forum.

Prescribed drugs were also a point of contention, though less often than restricted drugs. In the following series of excerpts from a thread on the topic, forum participants attempted to assert their own opinions about the relative acceptability of prescription drug use.

10 | -- prescription moodfuckers

From Nori Aoki on 10.27.2002, 12:41 AM:

Okay, so I'm a little new to this whole straight-edge concept. [...] Anyway, my ... thought, as it were, was this: how does taking prescription mood-altering drugs fit in with the sXe philosophy? Think of things like Prozac, Ritalin, Paxil, lithium ... stuff people take for depression, hyperactivity, etc.

Nori Aoki posed a neutral question, asking others for their opinions and suggesting that she did not yet have a subculturally informed opinion (“I’m a little new to this whole straight-edge concept”). In the responses that follow, some participants interpreted the ‘no drug rule’ relatively conservatively and argued that using even prescription drugs was against straightedge beliefs and was generally “a bad thing.”

11 | From Robert on 10.27.2002, 12:46 AM:

i guess i go a bit further than many, but i wouldn't take drugs especially if they altered your mood. i don't take weight lifting supplements (but i do take calcium and vitamins b/c im veggie) when told i should go on medication for blood pressure, i said no and just kicked my ass until I had perfect blood pressure. i stopped drinking caffeine. therefore, unless it was to the point of being very ill/dying, i would avoid drugs.

From XthingsfallapartX on 10.28.2002, 01:36 AM:

i would agree 100% with those who say that taking drugs like that is a) very much not edge and b) a bad thing. If you're unhappy, there are lots of ways to fix it-- and i have to say, i've never met anyone whose depression didn't get better when their life got better (ie, when they were in a happy relationship, or had an activity or cause they really cared about). However, if you find that you are still sad no matter what you do, there are other alternatives than addictive, damaging prescription drugs. The first thing i'd try is meditation; and if that still doesn't help, there are cures in traditional Chinese medicine that have been used for millennia, and are (if nothing else) at least less dangerous and addictive. [...]



The only time I ever give into it is with antibiotics, and even then, only if i'm really, really sick. Traditional medicine is just so much better, and the fact that it recognises a connection between the mind and body is definitely a big part of that. feel free to IM me sometime if you want to talk...

Rather than use prescribed drugs that were seen as “dangerous and addictive,” XthingsfallapartX described how alternative practices, based largely on self-control, could substitute.

Some participants took a middle-of-the-road approach, claiming that while they never took prescription drugs, they could understand why other people might need to. One participant stated, “if you do not need them, don't take them. [...] popping pills for anything and everything [is] wrong. If it is necessary to take meds, take them only as much as you need to, for only as long as you need to” (Posted by: girlychicky on 10.27.2002, 12:51 AM). She admitted that prescription drugs were sometimes necessary but claimed that they should be avoided as much as possible. To be explicit in how prescription drugs fit into her straightedge frame of reference, she added that she “wouldn't think any less of an sxe kid who took needed medicine.” This openness to the possibility of multiple frames of reference was also visible in other participants' posts:

12 From InnNerd on 10.27.2002, 05:48 AM:

Hmn. It is definitely a personal decision. I don't touch drugs of any kind if I can help it. [...] But again, some people, just for modern day health reasons, need to take medicinal drugs. Eh. Not for me.

From Jimmy the Punk on 10.27.2002, 09:57 PM:

take something if you really need to and it would make your life better and make people around you feel better too. [...] personally i would not touch any drug unless i was seriously ill or dying and this drug would actually improve things. [...] i prefer not to take aspirin or paracetamol or anything like that. a headache isn't really going to kill me, so i can live with it. but it's a personal choice and completely up to you what you do.

A few participants, including sungsam and myself (Extract 13), took a relatively liberal perspective on prescription drug use, especially in regard to psychological or psychiatric problems. We tried to draw attention to most people's lack of adequate knowledge about prescription drugs and informed discussants about the potential dangers associated with not following physicians' advice.

13 From Patrick on 10.28.2002, 11:21 AM:

I must say that, while I like thingsfallapart's suggestion to IM [Extract 11], that is to reach out and connect to others where you can feel safe about sharing your feelings, there are circumstances where prescription drugs are necessary. I don't think any of us has the professional knowledge to advise someone who has been given medication by a doctor NOT to take the medicine. That is just plain foolish!!

From sungsam on 11.04.2002, 05:26 AM:

some of y'all need to do some reading. [...] Anyone on psychotropics should be in counseling, and seeing a psychiatrist regularly. [...] I'm a mental health professional. I've been in this field for 10 years. I certainly understand some people's disdain for the drug companies, they push and peddle. I don't think that anyone should go on mood altering drugs if they don't need them, and I don't think that general practitioners should be handing them out.....I think it's irresponsible for someone to be on them without regular psychiatry visits. If someone truly needs them, they should be handling the entire reason, which is likely to be helped by counseling. While I very much respect eastern and alternative medicine, and I certainly think such things as meditation and yoga are very helpful for mild anxiety and dythymia, I think it's a serious mistake to think that someone who is ill enough to be considering suicide to be recommended to a homeopathic store. I have known quite a few people who have committed suicide, and while I try to respect other's opinions, I don't like to hear people spout off about 'addiction' as most psychotropics have no physical addictive qualities. [...] I hope that I've expressed this well. I'm not a drug pusher. [...] Oh, and I very much consider myself sXe. I avoid substance abuse because there is a family history, because I prefer to be experiencing reality, and because they are only likely to do damage to my mood and my life.

In addition to offering professional information, sungsam also explicitly self-identified as straightedge, perhaps to mitigate the perceived disjuncture between the roles of straightedge youth and mental health professional. Drugs represented a site of contestation between participants, whether related to psychotropics, beer, or

wine cooked in food. This was often carried over into seemingly trivial, everyday, legal substances. For example, there were forum participants who argued against the ingestion of caffeine or chocolate, citing them as stimulants and as addictive. Others rejected such stances and regarded them as extreme. In sum, straightedgers expressed a variety of opinions about drug use based upon their definitions of ‘drug’ and their (lack of) past experiences with drug use or users.

The various ways in which forum participants defined appropriate circumstances for ingesting particular drugs, (e.g., prescription drugs, alcohol cooked in food, caffeine in coffee or soda) suggests that participants employed techniques to neutralize certain behaviors within a straightedge role. As the analysis about drug-related perspectives (and analyses of sex and violence , below) indicate, there were situations in which the ‘no \_\_\_\_\_ rules’ were interpreted in ways which enabled participants to engage in various activities that could be interpreted as breaking the rules. Activities that some participants engaged in were not always accepted by other participants, and debate about the legitimacy of such behaviors was standard. Yet by justifying their behaviors through an individual frame of reference, participants were able to maintain authentic subcultural identities.

### *Sex*

14 +---Topic: all my sXe m8s r soo horny  
Posted by: Turtle on [June 2001]  
Just wondering if by any chance anyone else knows a lot of horny sXers.

Sex represented the other major belief-aspect of the straightedge subculture and was discussed second only to drug-related issues in the Straight Edge Discussion

forum. Sex was an important topic because many participants were adolescents in the process of coming to terms with themselves sexually. Aspects of psychological and emotional development with regards to the topic of sexuality were visible in the various ways participants defined the no sex rule.

Like drug-posts, posts about sexual activity could be divided into several categories. For example, forum participants regularly distinguished between the perceived benefits and dangers of promiscuity, pre-marital sex, and oral sex. Other sex topics were also openly discussed, including masturbation and pornography. Sex discussions seemed to be well attended (by checking the 'times viewed' counter) but were often sites of hostility and flaming as participants asserted their opinions. As one straightedger characterized it in a thread title, "Sex, the most disputable attribute [sic] of sXe" (Posted by: punkless on 02.15.2003, 07:02 AM).

The forum was an important subcultural site wherein participants learned to express their interpretations of the 'no sex rule' through interaction with others.

15 +---Topic: if i'm sxe, can i have sex?  
Posted by: Xcashewsx on [June 2001]  
if i really do love my partner, is it ok in the sxe rules to have sex with her?

In Extract (15), Xcashewsx asked other participants to provide a definition of the 'no sex rule' for her/him. The rule was framed objectively, as if there was one definition that was, to quote another participant, "absolutely correct." Responses to this post, as well as in dozens of other threads on sex-related topics, showed that no single meaning prevailed within the forum.

Some straightedgers believed it was acceptable to have sex with a boy- or girlfriend. These posts show how participants neutralized various forms of sexual activity.

16 Posted by: Xmagingrrlx on [July 2001]

It's not up to me or anybody else on this board whether or not you have sex with your girlfriend. If you love her and feel comfortable having sex with her then have sex with her.

Posted by: HCDude on [July 2001]

I say go for it, on my personal opinion...i just don't agree with the sleeping around bullshit, but if your in love...knock yourself out, that's what i kinda think.

+---Topic: sXe and the SeX

Posted by: Xmagingrrlx on [July 2001]

I think that sex is wonderful as long as it's between two people that love each other and are in the relationship for the long run. (aka either married or plan on getting married)

One participant argued that when s/he and her/his partner “love each other and are in the relationship for the long run,” sex was permissible. Other participants alternatively claimed that any form of pre-marital sex went against straightedge behavioral norms. Through neutralization techniques (Sykes and Matza 1957), some participants constructed love as a justification for sexual activity (Scott and Lyman 1968). That is, sex was justified based on certain contextual attributes: “love” or being “in the relationship for the long run,” versus “sleeping around.” While this frame of reference embraced the acceptability of loving sexual activity, it was resisted by other forum participants, who interpreted love as an excuse for engaging in sexual activities and subsequently criticized those straightedgers who either supported or engaged in sexual activity.<sup>26</sup>

17 +---Topic: ALL THIS SEX AND LOVE

Posted by: JohnPublic on [July 2001]

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<sup>26</sup> Scott and Lyman (1968) construct a typology of excuses and justifications. In terms of my analysis, love, as a justification for sex, represents the denial of injury, whereby an individual acknowledged doing an act, but justified it because there was no harm or damage caused. Love was constructed as an excuse for having sex by forum participants who reported abstaining from sexual activity. While Scott and Lyman's typology refers to how actors explain their own behaviors, I use their distinction in a different way by illustrating how ‘love as justification’ was activated by a group of actors that accepted the behavior, while ‘love as excuse’ was mobilized by those with opposing frames of reference.

It has been my observation that sex (and such) is OK as long as you are in love. RIGHT? Well, what defines "love"? I think we have lost touch with the meaning of that word and use it way to much and have devalued it.

But I know, and admit it or not we all know that sex, out of wedlock is inherently wrong, and we feel bad (admit it or not) when we do it. So we must appease ourselves and in some way justify it to ourselves, so we say that we are in love. "POOF" it makes it all better. WRONG. To all the ladies out there and guys too, don't you find it funny how this guy/girl who is so madly in "love" with you is ready to bed-down with you but can't work out an argument with you? Or when a serious topic about the relationship is approached they get flustered, and instead of talking it out, they try to avoid the topic? And then a few months later you find yourself single (or something). BUT HEY, AFTER ALL YOU ONCE WERE IN LOVE.

JohnPublic argued that love was just a word that straightedgers could insert into a description of their relationships to justify having sex, while their failure to fully embrace a loving relationship ("can't work out an argument," "instead of talking it out, they try to avoid the topic") provided an excuse for doing something that was in his terms "inherently wrong." JohnPublic was not alone in his belief-orientation toward sex. One participant merely stated in a discussion on the topic, "NO pre-marital sex" (posted by: xXxLINxXx) and another forum participant posted "I believe in waiting til marriage" (posted by: Prolem).

Such posts could be understood as personal opinions without necessarily relating them to the subcultural frame participants used when interacting. The link between individual norms and beliefs and a subcultural frame of reference were obvious in other posts.

18 Posted by: ColorfulXe on [July 2001]

I don't understand. People say sXe is about abstinence from indulgences, right? Well, isn't haven't sex for reasons other than to have a child an indulgence? I know, some of you say "it's about love, and closeness," but you can have love and closeness without giving into the temptations of sex. And our sexual desires are just another temptation that we have to overcome, to an extent, right?

ColorfulXe articulated a subcultural frame that was grounded in avoidance of 'indulgences' and framed all non-procreative sex as indulgent and therefore wrong. ColorfulXe's and JohnPublic's voices represented a minority position that tended to get drowned out by a majority that supported non-promiscuous sex grounded in loving or stable relationships.

Forms of sexual activity that sidestepped the issue of promiscuity were also discussed by participants online. Some of the discussions were humorous, including discussions that revolved around the various idioms used to describe autoerotic behaviors, while other threads or posts were more serious in nature. The thread below demonstrates both the humorous and serious sides of discussing masturbation.

19 +---Topic: MASTURBATION!!!

Posted by: Superstar on [June 2001]

How many of you masturbate? honestly?

Posted by: PLATOM on [June 2001]

Dude, doesn't everyone?

Posted by: Superstar on [June 2001]

i respect a girl more for masturbating than sleeping with some guy.

Posted by: TheMan on [June 2001]

masturbation is addictive.

Do you masturbated ever, if you feel depressed? Or anything like that?

masturbation, in essence, is no different from your average drug.

The chemical reactions that occur during the masturbation and at orgasm; and then the results thereafter... could be compared with use of drugs.

I'm not saying it's wrong to do it, i'm just saying... if you jack off every day, if you need to jack off, if you have trouble abstaining for a while... ya got a problem with it.

AND AND AND, Ahem, punkgrrl said - It feels good. It can be a stress reliever.

- hmm... sound familiar? Whats the difference? There is none.

As with promiscuity, masturbation was a dividing issue between forum participants.

In the thread above, participants laid out three different justifications or excuses for

masturbation: its naturalness; its relativity to other sexual activities, and its habit-forming potential.

In the first response to the thread root, PLATOM suggested that masturbation was a natural behavior (“Dude, doesn’t everyone?”) and therefore implied its taken-for-granted acceptability. In the second excerpted response, posted by the thread’s originator, Superstar argued that he “respect[ed] a girl more for masturbating than sleeping with some guy.” The act of masturbation, when compared with promiscuity (implicitly framed as being against straightedge’s ‘no sex rule’) was considered relatively acceptable. In contrast, TheMan’s post questioned how masturbation was used. He presented masturbation as being similar in function to drug use, including doing it “if you feel depressed,” “the chemical reactions that occur...and the results,” and how it was rationalized as “a stress reliever.” Others occasionally took a similar position, as the following post from another forum indicates.

20 +---Topic: How Porn is destroys Lives

Posted by: Papper on 07.09.2001

If masturbation becomes a habit, then it should be stopped. At most it could be used as an alternative to sexual intercourse, or pleasure from another person which could mess things up. If you really feel "it" then masturbate, but.... if you start noticing yourself masturbating just because your bored, then you should stop.

Some posters implicitly took up a definition of straightedge as ‘no addictions’ or ‘no indulgences’ rather than ‘no drugs or sex’ per se. Masturbation was seen as taking control of a person’s life when performed too often or to relieve boredom or stress. Thus masturbation’s habit-forming potential made it unacceptable behavior., yet arguments against masturbation were rejected by a majority of thread



participants. Common responses to TheMan's and Papper's posts included the following and correspond to the justifications outlined above.

21 Posted by: xamalekx on [June 2001]  
there is a difference, TheMan.  
masturbation can't be seen as a stress relieving artificial substance. its wholly like peeing on your foot and relieving stress, not taking drugs.

Posted by: xHCgrrrlx on [June 2001]  
there is a huge difference.  
i have never heard of anyone having health problems due to frequent masturbation, unless you count sore arm muscles and penile chafing...

Posted by: PLATOM on [June 2001]  
for gods sake its natural once in a while, hows the air up there on the moral high horse??

xamalekx distinguished masturbation, as a natural act, was acceptable, versus using artificial substances, which was not. His analogy was problematic however because sexual intercourse is also a natural act, yet this was not acceptable behavior. No one questioned his analogy. XHCgrrrlx drew on the historical, 'no addictions' interpretation of the rules, noting that masturbation did not cause health problems. Lastly, PLATOM countered by claiming that distancing the rules from the "moral high horse," thus suggesting that some interpretations of the rules bordered on preaching, which was generally disdained.

A third sex-related issue that was discussed in the online forum was pornography. Watching pornography was considered a destructive behavior by some participants, but was construed by others as either unproblematic or as relatively acceptable, given the subcultural limits placed on promiscuous sexual activity.

22 +---Topic: PORN  
Posted by: Whitby on [July 2001]  
good thing.. or a bad thing?.

whats your view?

Posted by: alaric on [July 2001]

all for porn, my friend

although most of it is either stupid or disgusting, I think its a good friend to lonely (and not so lonely types!!) people the world over...

Posted by: Funky on [July 2001]

I'm not a porn fan by any sorts, but if it makes you happy, makes you laugh or just flat out entertains you in that sort of way then more power to ya!

The question as to the relative value of pornography was raised. The first two replies took up a supportive stance by arguing that it was “a good friend to lonely people” or could “make you happy,” but each post also qualified their support. alaric's post constructed pornography first as “either stupid or disgusting” before going on to accept its use by “lonely people.” Likewise, Funky claimed that s/he was “not a porn fan by any sorts” but supported its use by individuals who benefited from it.

Other participants took this position, as demonstrated in a post by XfruitloopXx. S/He first constructed pornography as “degrading,” but then shifted to offer a view of pornography as a “substitute” for engaging in promiscuous activities.

23 Posted by: XfruitloopXx on [July 2001]

Porn is degrading. [...] Buuuut... if porn is the substitute for some guy going out and getting laid by the first woman he sees, then it (for lack of a better word) is \*eek\* helpful.

Like sexual behaviors such as masturbation, pornography was construed by some forum participants as relatively acceptable behavior. Yet they regularly expressed a personal rejection of such behavior before claiming its legitimacy for others. Other straightedgers rejected pornography outright. Two reasons typified this position and are encapsulated in the following post.

24 Posted by: JohnPublic on [July 2001]

The question you propose is if we are for or against it. I am against it.

Heres why:

-It degrades people, both those who view it and do it-

-Takes away the mystique of women-

-For all those minors who have viewed it, it takes something away, especially if you see it well before you are 18.-

There are other reasons, but like the above ones it is a matter of opinion and values, along with moral and ethical beliefs.

I do want to ask this to all sXe people, we are against mind altering drugs, but not against other mind altering materials?

On one hand, pornography was seen as something that went against straightedge rules, either as a mind-altering or an addictive behavior. On the other hand, it was portrayed as degrading and dehumanizing. JohnPublic's post represented an articulate response to the question of pornography and opened up the thread to arguments from pro and con perspectives.

25 Posted by: xHCgrrrlx on [July 2001]

how does porn alter your mind...?

i am the same person when i am watching porn as i am when i am watching..whatever...

Posted by: TheMan on [July 2001]

Punkgirl: It DOES alter your mind.

Did you know when you get horny/aroused/whatever your mind is altered. The chemical reactions that are going off can cause you to act differently (usually make you act, if given the chance, in a rather promiscuous manner).

Observe yourself watching an action film; then observe yourself watching some hardcore porn.

xHCgrrrlx argued that porn was not mind-altering, but her position was subsequently countered by TheMan, who claimed that chemical reactions occurred in the brain that caused individuals to act differently. TheMan's argument implicitly linked pornography with the 'no drugs rule' by presenting pornography as a stimulant. Four posts later, TheMan added the idea that pornography was also "tempting" and therefore potentially addictive.

26 Posted by: TheMan on [July 2001]

the worst thing about porn is that its so tempting. tempting as in theres lots of money in the porn industry.

The other idea presented by JohnPublic, that pornography was dehumanizing, also received mixed responses. Some supported his assertion in another thread on the same topic. xOx saw pornography as dehumanizing as well as unhealthy and potentially addictive:

27 +---Topic: X PORNO LOVERS X started by alaric  
Posted by: xOx on [September 2001]  
WHY are there so many poeple in to porno on the internet? and Whats up with SXE looking at that shit ?  
Its explodes [exploits] wemon and it just temps you to want to go have sex... at least in my opinion. SO tell me why the hell do some many people like to go to the pages and look at that shot when they know its not good for them?

Similarly, TheMan argued against pornography, this time presenting pornography as breaking the ‘no sex rule’ rather than the ‘no drugs rule’ (as in Extract 25).

28 Posted by: TheMan on [September 2001]  
I am against porn.  
I doubt anyone else here is with me on my stance, but it's my opinion so yeah.  
Eh, how do I explain it... how about ah... I just say: I view pornography as promiscuity of the mind.

Pornography, like other sex-based issues, was still viewed by some participants as relatively acceptable, especially when framed by possible alternatives. One poster argued that porn “rapes the mind” and was therefore immoral. Yet, s/he simultaneously considered it as an acceptable substitute for “going out and having sex.” Online discussions about pornography were not typical; they did not revolve around issues of freedom of speech or freedom of expression. Rather, discussions were grounded in the relationship between consuming pornography and being straightedge.

The differences of opinion regarding sex were not settled in the online forum during my year-and-a-half of participant observation. Not only were participants divided between the pros and cons of viewing pornographic materials, but they employed various justifications to legitimate their individuals beliefs and attitudes.

*Peripheral frames of reference – hardliners and violence*

Beyond the most common discussions concerning straightedge rules about drugs and sex, there were occasional threads about peripheral straightedge norms and beliefs. In the opening section of this chapter I noted that forum participants included gambling, vegetarianism/veganism, and violence in their definition of straightedge. Like more central norms and beliefs, peripheral ones were similarly contested. I now briefly look at the issue of violence and hardline militancy.<sup>27</sup> This analysis stands as one example of how peripheral beliefs more generally were discussed.

The topic of violence was explicitly engaged in the forum. Discussing violence was inevitable because of the presence of both non-violent participants and hardliners – straightedge purists who held what many participants considered to be radically conservative interpretations of straightedge rules. There was confusion among many participants as to the intersection of hardline orthodoxy and the support of violent behavior against non-straightedgers. That is, non-hardline participants often conflated hardline and violence, though it also seemed that self-identifying hardliners wrote most often about the acceptability of violence.

29 Posted by: Billy D on [June 2001]

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 5 for more on hardline militancy

[...] Hardline is don't drink, don't do drugs, avoid as much OTC medicene as possible, don't have sex unless you are prepared to have a kid if so happens (so no preventative hormonal drugs), no caffine, and usually strict veggie, if not vegan.

Being millitant is when you set light to butchers, beat the shit out of people for offering you a beer, attack people for wearing fur, bomb animal testing labs, kill rednecks, etc... Act like Salt lake city Milantant edge.

It is not someone who choses to be very strictly straightedge.

Billy D posted interpretation of hardline and militancy because of the ambiguity surrounding hardliners, who were alternatively defined as straightedge purists or as militants (see also Wood 1999). Billy D's post was meant to clarify the distinction.

Hardline participants expressed anger and resentment toward other forum participants for portraying hardliners as zealots. In Chapter 5, Extract (14), Xwillingsacrificex was sympathetic toward hardliners, who in her/his eyes represented "concrete beliefs" and being "true to everything they do." Hardliners were kids who were willing to make a public display of their beliefs and who were not likely to back down from a confrontation. His view was further supported by the assertion that straightedge was not "a symbol of peace."

Likewise in the online forum, hardliners were often easily offended and took antagonistic stances when communicating with non-hardline participants. Hardliners saw themselves as more committed to the core beliefs of straightedge than others, whom they accused of being weak and irresolute in their life-long commitment to the scene and to norms. Other straightedgers saw hardline differently and stated as much in response to Xwillingsacrificex's post above:

30 Posted by: 847jeff on [June 2001]

ya know why people hate hardliners? it's cuz they're too thick headed to realize we're not gonna change.. yet they continue to push what they think on us when we make it clear we're not gonna change.  
when they're not doin that, they're fine..

Posted by: nuthen on [June 2001]

i used to live in salt lake city and [...] the scene in salt lake city is far from being positive.

why people don't like hardline. lets look at some slogans.

by any means necessary.

no compromise.

our way or no way.

basically if you aren't sympathizing with hardline you are the problem therefore you are the enemy. hardline is or was a militant faction within that straightedge scene, that believed in a fight to bring everything back to adam and eve. if anyone or anything stood in the way of that fight, that problem was seen to need to be dealt with. therefore almost everyone on this board will be a problem in your fight, therefore we are all enemy's of hardline.

Non-hardline participants, representing a majority in the forum, typically saw hardliners not as purists but as a radical and violent faction that generated a bad reputation, which participants had to deal with. Hardliners and their sympathizers online tried to draw distinctions not only between their level of commitment versus non-hardliners, but also between hardline and militant forms of straightedge.

Whether or not hardliners embraced violence, violent attitudes could be seen occasionally within the Straight Edge Discussion forum. In Extract (31), forum participants discuss two situations in which violent behavior was potentially acceptable, namely if someone blew cigarette smoke into their face or if someone offered them a cigarette.

31 +---Topic: Straight Edge gangs?

Posted by: HCDude on [July 2001]

if someone blew smoke in my face i would beat the \*f u c k\* out of them. Now, [...] if someone offered me a cigarette i would do the same by beating the \*f u c k\* out of them.

Posted by: XpoisionfreeX on [July 2001]

right on HCDude someone blows smoke in my face i would kick thier ass too

Posted by: berg on [July 2001]

i say get real. [...] if someone blows smoke in your face- lose the macho shit..

WALK AWAY. you dont need that, if you're above drugs, you're above violence.

if you intend on beating up anyone who provokes you then you might as well be

smoking up before/after the cause. just think.

Posted by: XpoisionfreeX on [July 2001]

i wouldnt hit someone if they offerd me one w/o knowing that i was sXe but if someone

blew smoke in my face intentonaly i would kick thier ass i don't need thier poison

Violent attitudes were expressed in regards to an imagined other who was not described. HCDude, who had previously claimed to “live by the boot,” said that he would beat anyone who either blew smoke in his face or offered him a cigarette. In this case, HCDude expressed his unwillingness to interact with anyone who used drugs. In a response, xdoorx stated that violent behavior would be justified against someone who “intentionally” blew smoke in her/his face, but claimed the being offered a cigarette by someone who did not recognize her/his subcultural affiliation did not provide sufficient grounds to warrant violent action. In contrast, berg argued that any violent action was unacceptable. Berg framed her/his rejection of violence by representing straightedgers as “above drugs, above violence.” He then attempted to represent violent straightedgers as similar to drug users: “you might as well be smoking up before/after the cause” meant that only drug users would be foolish enough to resort to violence.

Participants sometimes wrote about violence as acceptable, even when they did not espouse a militant version of straightedge per se. In other threads, participants discussed how violence was brought upon them, for example by belligerent drunks at parties. Physical violence was sometimes cited as necessary, even if the only attack was a verbal one against the straightedge subculture, rather than an attack against an individual. Thus, like norms regarding drugs and sex, participants legitimated certain violent behaviors.



## Summary

This chapter showed how straightedge subcultural norms are created and negotiated in interaction among forum participants. First, I looked at the relatively stable normative structure of the straightedge subculture over time. This was accomplished by comparing major themes discussed by contemporary straightedgers with both original straightedge music (Minor Threat 1981a, 1981b) and the norms reported in past research (Lahickey 1998; Wood 1999b). Next, I illustrated the heterogeneity of individual frames of reference that comprise the subculture. Two primary norms were discussed in the forum: ‘no drugs’ and ‘no sex.’ Past research treated these rules as obvious and failed to describe how they are understood and communicated by subculturalists themselves. Studying forum posts highlights the ambiguous nature of the rules and suggests how straightedge is diffused among various scenes. This diffusion underpins recent research and adds support for subcultural schism theory. Wood (2000) argued that when enough individuals experience similar forms of psychological strain between their subjective interpretations and the norms to which they are bound, they will break away and form a new, shared frame of reference. The data presented demonstrate the process that occurs before subcultural schisms by offering a view of the conflicting positions expressed in everyday discourse among participants of a straightedge scene.

## CHAPTER 8

### Conclusion

My interests in contemporary subcultural phenomena, in the straightedge youth subculture, and in the role that the Internet plays in modern social life led me to an in-depth study of straightedge subculture on the Internet. Throughout this research project, I have worked toward achieving two goals. First, I wanted to offer a detailed, substantive picture of the straightedge subculture as it exists online. This was accomplished through ethnographic research on a single online forum. I do not argue that the site studied is representative or archetypical of all straightedge Internet sites, but do believe that my research informs sociological and cultural knowledge of the subculture. The research questions that guided this aspect of my study were: (1) How does the website under investigation represent the characteristics of straightedge? ; and (2) What are the differences between Internet participants who discover the straightedge subculture online versus those who are socialized via f2f scenes? Answering these questions has provided a look into how subcultures can be experienced using new communication technologies such as the Internet.

Second, I wanted to demonstrate the usefulness of a social psychological approach to studying subcultural phenomena online. This was an intriguing sociological proposition, given that the Internet forum under investigation was comprised of individuals who were not co-present and whose interaction was asynchronous. To achieve this goal, I sought to answer the following questions: (1) What can research on a straightedge Internet site reveal about how Internet users express processes of subcultural style, affiliation, and boundaries?; and (2) What

can research on an Internet forum uncover about how participants express their individual interpretations of straightedge norms? By using concepts from sociology, psychology, and cultural studies, I highlighted the construction of subcultural identities, subcultural boundaries, and the negotiation between subcultural norms and personal frames of reference. In this final chapter I summarize and evaluate what I have learned. This is done to answer my final research question: What can the subculture concept offer to the study of straightedge?

Previous research studied straightedge as a f2f or music phenomenon. Wood (1999) analyzed music lyrics to characterize major shifts in straightedge from the late-1980s to the mid-1990s. Irwin (2000) conducted ethnographic research in a local straightedge scene in New York and described participants' views on the scene, music and dance, religion and diet, and on youth drug culture. Allan and Kidder (2000) analyzed interview data to describe the construction of straightedge identities vis-à-vis mainstream- and drug-cultures. Christensen (1999), Pileggi (1998), and Wood (2001) reported using the Internet to help collect data on hardcore and straightedge. They also discussed, to various degrees, how the Internet was used by straightedgers, but only for getting information on straightedge bands and concerts.

In past research, there was a distinct emphasis on f2f music scenes, which were conceptualized as the boundaries of straightedge. Internet tools, such as email, the worldwide web, and Usenet, were utilized by researchers to collect data, but the Internet itself was not studied as a subcultural medium and resource. The importance of the Internet in subculture research is only now becoming apparent (see Hodkinson 2002), though no research has yet provided evidence of how the

Internet may actually change a subculture. Another shortcoming of past research involves a failure to deconstruct straightedge norms. Researchers claimed that straightedge participants reject any or all of the following: drug use, casual sex, meat or animal products, mainstream music and styles. Yet, there was no attempt to study the ways that individuals came to attach meanings to these norms. Rather, rules against drug use, casual sex, etc., were taken for granted as a priori subcultural elements that participants were socialized to accept as part of a straightedge identity. Using the subculture concept extends sociological knowledge of straightedge by illuminating how cultural elements are transmitted.

#### Straightedge youth and Internet culture

My overall impressions after a year and a half of participating in and observing the Straight Edge Discussion forum is that its participants are concerned with two things: finding meaningful contact with others who self-identify as straightedge; and discursively organizing a coherent and authentic self. Straightedge was originally formulated to empower youth to resist what was seen as peer and pop-culture pressures to engage in behaviors which they personally considered dangerous or destructive (Lahickey 1998). This original formulation can still be seen in straightedgers' posts online. Many participants described straightedge as a subculture/philosophy/movement/lifestyle where kids (including themselves) could feel good about being sober and refraining from what they saw as dangerous or destructive teenage behaviors.

Individuals in the forum each brought their own sets of beliefs and experiences into the straightedge subculture and shared their unique opinions regarding

appropriate and inappropriate behavior. By studying the content of threads in the Straight Edge Discussion forum, we saw the variability within straightedge, which resulted from many unique frames of reference coming together. The discussion generated in the forum highlights how straightedge rules are transmitted between participants in interaction and thus emphasizes the communicative nature of the subculture. Through posting messages in the forum and reading others' posts (i.e., textually interacting with other forum participants), social psychological frames of reference were actively constructed and negotiated within, and therefore continuously modified, broader subcultural norms.

The online forum studied highlights the diversity of individual norm- and belief-orientations that revolve around the same basic problems for youth. Chapter 5 highlighted the various expressions of subcultural identity online. Through strategic use of straightedge symbols in usernames and sig.files, to means of affiliation and boundary construction, the straightedge forum I studied seemed to be a collection of independently-minded people who nevertheless shared a common set of concerns about modern life and their place in it. The fact that kids came from across the US/Canada, Europe, and Australia/New Zealand to post messages about similar social problems speaks to the growing similarity of leisure activity between youth cultures globally. In Chapter 7 we saw that the main problems expressed by forum participants were drugs and sex. For some, other problems were also more or less central to their lives, such as violence. More peripheral problems were occasionally seen in the forum which were not closely analyzed, such as animal rights, vegetarianism and veganism, and religion. How participants oriented to these problems was not uniform.

One reason why disagreement existed regarding norms is that forum participants tended to come and go. According to my own observations and reports from the website's owner/administrator, a majority of participants participated in the online forum for 6 months or less. Temporary or fleeting membership is a common aspect of life online (Ward 1999) as well as among contemporary youth subcultures (Thornton 1995). New participants regularly reported that their reason for joining was because of their desire to communicate with others who shared similar beliefs regarding the avoidance of drug use and sex. This is not a surprise given that drug use and sexual activity are two problematic issues for youth to deal with. Other themes that some individuals brought into straightedge discussions, such as violence, likely remained peripheral norms because they were also peripheral issues in most of these youths' lives.

The various ways in which participants self-identified with the subculture, and the conflicts between hardcore and non-hardcore participants, shed light on the importance of authenticity in contemporary subcultures (McLeod 1999; Muggleton 2000; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995). Authenticity is expressed as both individual and social identities. Sherry Turkle has argued that the Internet is a particularly useful space for youth to experiment with building core aspects of identity (Turkle and Salamensky 2001). Extending from Eric Erikson's concept of psychological moratorium, Turkle (1997, 1999) suggests that youth use the Internet as a space where identities grounded in particular sets of norms, beliefs and values can be played out without the fears they might face in the f2f world. If others reject claims to new or alternative identities, individuals online can at least avoid many of the negative consequences that would accompany it in the f2f world. Turkle's work

offers one possible explanation for why the Straight Edge Discussion forum is both relatively popular (over 1,350 registered users in 16 months) and full of competing definitions – it provides a cyberspace for youth to try out a straightedge identity with very little (if any) ‘real world’ consequences if the identity does not work.

Whereas Turkle’s research explains the mobilization of particular aspects of identity as playful and inconsequential, the research presented makes the case for theorizing such mobilizations as attempts to express unique and meaningful personal and social identities. Hardcore straightedgers and netedgers alike laid claim to authentic subcultural identity and expressed important reasons for doing so. Both member types also constructed collective identities that separated them from mainstream youth cultures, thereby providing self-serving functions. I would therefore argue against theorizing identity-making processes in cyberspace as inconsequential to youth.

Identity-making strategies are complex, as individuals struggle to be simultaneously unique and part of something larger. In her study on club culture, Sarah Thornton (1995) demonstrates how subcultural members constantly struggle to legitimize their lifestyle as *the* lifestyle by comparing themselves with Others who possess either poor taste or no taste at all. Building on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of distinction, Thornton shows how subcultural capital is used by members to legitimate their own claims of individuality and authenticity within a subculture. Similarly, David Muggleton (2000) found in his study of subcultural style that contemporary subculturalists regularly make comparisons between themselves and the mainstream to create meaningful self-images. Muggleton also talks about within-group comparisons and how they serve to set individuals off as unique,

while still conforming to subcultural boundaries. Simultaneous comparison-making, both within and between social categories, is also discussed by Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990, 1995), whose conversation analytic technique highlights the linguistic tools subculturalists use to construct individual and social identities. This dissertation, particularly Chapter 6, can add to the literature on identity-making processes by providing insight into social processes that are at work in non-f2f, asynchronous communication.

This research also sheds more focused light on how youth today use the Internet to engage in computer-mediated social life. This case study has shown that straightedge forum individuals use the Internet to share subcultural knowledge, but it is necessary to explicate how the Internet serves as a subcultural resource as well as a medium. In Chapter 7 we saw an example of a person who learned about the straightedge subculture through anonymous interaction in an IRC program. After being told he was straightedge and finding out the word's meaning online, he became attracted to the subculture and subsequently decided to compile more comprehensive information about straightedge on a dedicated website. The result is a website that contains the Straight Edge Discussion forum. As youth culture and Internet culture become increasingly intertwined (Nielson NetRatings 2002), future research needs to focus on the extent to which Internet resources are used by individuals of other subcultures and organizations to help determine *how* important the Internet is becoming.



### The straightedge subculture online

Like many Internet sites, the Straight Edge Discussion forum served the needs of a diverse set of individuals who gathered around a set of collective norms and beliefs about themselves and their social world. As we saw, straightedge was understood as a very individualistic phenomenon by many of its adherents, but more like an organization by others. While participants regularly said things like “don’t let anyone tell you how to live,” they expected others to adopt a lifestyle that matched a set of prescribed behaviors. Further, the adoption of norms was linked by some members to participation in f2f straightedge scenes. This paradoxical idea of collective individualism can be traced to straightedge’s parent culture, punk, and to one of its primary characteristics, the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethic.

In his essay on the American punk/hardcore subculture, Kevin Mattson (2001) grounds the DIY ethic in “experiments in alternative production and distribution of cultural products. This is most clearly captured in how youth put on hardcore shows during the 1980s” (p. 74). To oversimplify his thesis, the DIY ethic, characterized by a highly politicized philosophy which denounces the corporatization of youth leisure activities, permeated the American punk/hardcore music subculture since the early 1980s. This led in many cases to subcultural youth rejecting traditional and mainstream styles of protest in favor of seeking alternative sites of resistance. While Mattson goes on to develop a rather broad image of how punk/hardcore youth protest in the f2f world, I draw attention to his claim that “many young punks believed high school life in general was repressive and conformist” and “so too they rejected the high school as a place for information

seeking. They searched for alternative politics outside the confines of school” (Mattson 2001:81).

The Internet, in addition to local punk/hardcore music scenes, provides a space for such politics. The Internet has emerged as a meta-site where alternative politics are practiced, either as an extension of radical politics in the f2f world, or as an only means of participating in such activities. The Straight Edge Discussion forum allowed youth to gather from around the world to discuss a politics of resistance against so-called mainstream culture. The DIY ethic is further represented in how straightedgers brought diverse frames of reference to bear in their discussions about straightedge norms and beliefs. Participants openly contested how straightedge rules ought to be interpreted and developed individualized measures of acceptability to justify their own behaviors within the confines of the forum. Thus the DIY ethic operated even within the forum, and in an extreme form served to divide consensus through its emphasis on collective individualism.

Explaining within-forum conflict with the DIY concept supports the idea that the straightedge subculture is a heterogeneous phenomenon and provides insight into the internal divisiveness which I analyzed in Chapter 6. Just as participants held beliefs about drugs and sex that they claimed differed from larger peer, adult and consumer cultures that envelope them, they also created internal boundaries which were mobilized to support claims of individual authenticity and commitment. Straightedgers constructed ‘true’ subcultural selves and, to various degrees, worked to separate themselves from both outsiders and poseurs. The resultant membership types – hardcore, netedge, drug free – were each dependent on an implicit commitment to the DIY ethic. Hardcore straightedgers saw themselves as the ones

who truly embodied DIY through their participation in local music scenes. Netedgers saw themselves as embodying DIY ideologies by transcending the trendiness of scenes and defining straightedge as a personal, lifelong commitment. Drug free participants viewed themselves as representing a DIY ethic by having moved beyond the need for labels. Thus while the Internet forum offered participants a subcultural space in which to articulate a politics of resistance, the resistance was not organized, but was rather diffuse. Some straightedgers wrote about the subculture making a positive change in the world, but a majority wrote about change only at the individual level. That is, they articulated straightedge not as an organized social movement based on collective action, but as a personal lifestyle choice.<sup>28</sup>

While one way to explain this diffusion is by the DIY ethic and the determination of individual subculturalists to do their own thing, other researchers argue that people in contemporary society have been exhibiting a desire for communities of “like-minded individuals” for some time (Sennett 1977:239; Wuthnow 1994:5; see also Jones 1995a, 1997; Kanter 1973; Rheingold 2000). These authors suggest that contemporary communities are more often grounded in self-satisfaction and ego feeding, rather than in a commitment to social change. Robert Wuthnow puts it succinctly, arguing that “small groups” today “may function more as a place where each individual comes to think about himself or herself than where genuine concern about others triumphs over individual needs”

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<sup>28</sup> Personal lifestyle choices have been linked to group-level phenomena by New Social Movements (NSM) researchers. NSM work focuses on aspects of collective identity in diffuse, culture-based phenomena rather than more traditional organization for collective action. For recent research on straightedge as a diffuse social movement, see Haenfler (2002; 2003).

(Wuthnow 1994: 15). He does not argue for a radical egoism, however, instead claiming that contemporary small groups serve to balance the needs of the individual with the collective, though the balance “is often tipped decisively in the direction of the individual” (Wuthnow 1994:190). For Jan Fernback, new forms of community on the Internet are likened to “destructive *Gemeinschafts*,” where the integrity of personal ideals (and thus individual integrity and authenticity) takes precedence over collective action (Fernback 1997:41-42).

Mattson’s discussion of the DIY ethic, as well as Sennet’s, Wuthnow’s, and Fernback’s discussions of the pragmatics of new communities, help us understand the role of straightedge on the Internet as articulated by forum participants. Netedgers, for example, seemed more willing to push for a more open and inclusive subculture and were most ready to welcome new members into straightedge subculture than hardcore participants. They had found a subcultural site that enabled them to express meaningful aspects of the self, but found that there was often conflict with hardcore participants over the right to claim an authentic straightedge identity. A DIY ethic was visible in netedgers’ attempts to marginalize hardcore participants’ exclusive opinions about membership. The DIY ethic was epitomized in the Straight Edge Discussion forum’s owner/administrator, who sponsored the forum and paid all the expenses related to their operation, only to ensure that people with Internet access could find information about straightedge as well as a place to interact meaningfully with other straightedgers, regardless of whether they belonged to a f2f straightedge scene. The forum also benefited immensely from the volunteerism of netedge moderators, who gave time everyday to ensure that the website operated smoothly, that conflicts within the forum were

minimized, and that participants were treated with respect. The idea of a destructive Gemeinschaft, on the other hand, was also visible in the language that hardcore and netedge participants used to describe themselves versus poseurs and sell-outs, people whom they saw as diluting the straightedge subculture either by removing its roots from the hardcore music scene or by failing in their lifelong commitment to subcultural norms.

### Straightedge, the Internet, and theorizing subculture

I have emphasized an interactionist approach to this study of straightedge on the Internet and thus diverge from past research on the subculture. My analysis emphasizes that the subcultural is made up of individuals who each bring a unique set of interpretations to bear in their interactions with others. In Chapter 6, for example, straightedgers brought their biographies to bear when articulating categorical affiliation and constructing subcultural selves. Each person brought their individual frame of reference into the forum and worked out their place within the subculture by neutralizing their own behaviors. Such neutralizations enabled forum participants to feel secure with their subcultural identity while allowing for a wide range of behaviors to exist, often in contrast with one another. In Chapter 7, straightedge was articulated by individuals from different parts of the world – from Australia to Europe to many parts of North America. Regardless of where they were first introduced to straightedge, participants brought similar sets of beliefs to bear in their conversations with me, though differences could be seen in how each person defined the central elements of the subculture. Rather than treat conflict over subcultural norms as something that results in schisms, as Wood

(2000) does, my study shows that conflict over the meaning of straightedge is a natural intra-subculture process.

The importance of analyzing forms of subcultural affiliation and the creation and maintenance of subcultural boundaries, as well as analyzing heterogeneous beliefs and norms, lies in the clues it provides about how straightedge subculture is created in interaction. This in turn may inform subcultural theorizing more generally. Fine and Kleinman (1979) theorize that all subcultures arise through symbolic interaction between individuals. This interaction occurs within, between and outside of the subcultural scenes in question. One of their criticisms of previous subcultural research was of how subcultures were treated as reified social facts that were viewed apart from, and thus determinant of, subcultural members. This research demonstrates how the straightedge subculture is constructed through interaction by highlighting the linguistic methods that individuals used to construct their own and others' subcultural identities as well as how individuals negotiate various conflicting frames of reference.

My findings have two important implications for social psychological research on subcultures. The first is illustrated in the last set of posts from Chapter 5 (Extracts 23-25). There, two of xXnotatoyXx's biggest critics explicitly self-identified as non-straightedgers. Ethical Underground had explained in Chapter 5 (Extract 10) that he did not self-identify as straightedge because the term was useless to him. Similarly, ThreeSixNine claimed that he was drug free but not straightedge. Yet these two individuals actively constructed boundaries that positioned them as insiders and xXXnotatoyXxx as an outsider. Their actions were largely supported by self-identifying straightedge participants.

This finding contrasts Fine and Kleinman's (1979) thesis that self-identification is a necessary component of membership in a subculture. I agree that self-identification is one way of defining subcultural boundaries. But my analysis of the Straight Edge Discussion forum shows that the straightedge forum partially consists of individuals who do not self-identify as straightedgers, and perhaps more importantly, these closely related outsiders play an instrumental role in defining and maintaining boundaries. For this reason, it may be necessary for identity researchers to reconsider the role of self-identification in contemporary subcultures.

Second, I suggest the Internet as an additional type of communication interlock. Fine and Kleinman's work on subculture relies on communication interlocks to explain how geographically separated individuals and groups share culture. As we saw in Chapter 2, they name four types of interlocks which together explain subcultural diffusion beyond the local. I argue that the Internet can be conceived as a new type of communication interlock. By interacting in chat rooms and on bulletin boards, which are treated as subcultural scenes, participants in subcultures can spread shared understandings beyond local constraints. Subcultural data on the Internet remain for others who have access, across time and space. The importance of acknowledging the Internet as a communication interlock stems from the growing sense of marginality that youth today experience and the nature of interpersonal relationships in cyberspace. As suggested in the introduction, participation in youth subcultures can be understood as a consequence of contemporary life. Michel de Certeau (1984) suggests that "marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive" (p. xvii). In turn, Jon Stratton interprets de Certeau's insight as an explanation for the growth of

marginalized groupings in cyberspace – the pervasiveness of marginality pushes people to find new spaces within which meaningful identities can be constructed (Stratton 2000). The search for meaning and for like-minded others is facilitated by the Internet and partially fulfilled various cyberspaces.

While claims about the finding community find support in the cyberspace literature, a concomitant idea is that the ephemeral aspects of cyber-identity correlate to a rejection of ascribed identifications as they exist in the f2f world. The mediated quality of the Internet allows individuals more freedom to avoid identities that they do not wish to carry. This may help explain why individuals move among Internet communities frequently, searching for others who share similar interests, but oftentimes unwilling to invest in a collective identity (Gerlander and Takala 1997). Collective identities may be “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). The Internet, as a new type of communication interlock, conceptualizes the movement of subcultural information via wandering Internet users, while also allowing for the fact that Internet users may share subcultural beliefs and feel a part of an Internet community without feeling the need to self-identify as category members.

#### Suggestions for future research

First, future research should work out the conceptual modification I have suggested for an interactionist conceptualization of subculture as it relates to the Internet. Specifically, the idea of the Internet as a new type of communication



interlock needs to be more fully theorized and researched. Work in this area should focus on the types of Internet resources being used by other collectivities and organizations to help determine how important the Internet is becoming. This could be done through comparative analysis of a sample of individuals who relate to a subculture, both f2f and online, to determine how they express subcultural identities, values, or norms in the two modes.

A second and timely suggestion responds to a recent call for more detailed research on the connections between two traditions of identity theorization: IT and SIT/SCT (Hogg and Ridgeway 2003). Preliminary theoretical connections have been mapped out (Hogg, et al. 1995; Stets and Burke 2000), but empirical research is still sparse. Kay Deaux and Daniela Martin (2003) offer one possible route toward combining IT and SIT/SCT by distinguishing two levels of context in identity processes – categorical and network contexts. The categorical level has to do with how individuals identify themselves as members of categories or groups. Self-identifying with a category provides individuals with others who will potentially affirm identity claims, with subsequent effects on self-esteem. On the network level, the focus lies on the development of social roles within situational contexts and how such roles “provide additional structure and support for the category-based identity” (Deaux and Martin 2003:106). Their model conceptualizes identities as simultaneously subjectively claimed and collectively ascribed. Chapters 5 and 6 offered analyses of forum participants’ individual and social identities. Further elaboration of the relationship between each aspect of straightedge identity would benefit from and further elaborate Deaux and Martin’s model.

Emphasis was placed on norms and beliefs rather than on values in this research. Values are another important component of subculture, and they offer a conceptual link between collective and personal aspects of identity (Hitlin 2003). Current research utilizes Rokeach's (1973) and Schwartz's (1992) work on a model of universal values to clarify how values are linked to expressing certain personal, collective and social identities (Hitlin 2003). Further research should seek to measure the various values to which straightedgers subscribe. Such work would provide further insight into intra- and inter-categorical (in)consistencies. These values may then be compared to non-straightedge populations to better define the affective boundaries of the subculture. Measuring the value-orientations of forum participants might uncover further differences between member types as well.

Because of the case study approach, future research that focused on multiple Internet sites would help modify and improve sociological and social psychological knowledge of straightedge on the Internet. I noted in Chapter 3 that I visited multiple straightedge Internet forums (as well as reviewing a Usenet list) before deciding on a research site. One reason for my selection was the hostility and flaming that seemed more prevalent on other forums. Comparing the quality and quantity of interaction among two or more Internet forums might uncover important aspects of subcultural affiliation and identity. Research on communication practices should be aware of the fact that multiple media are used online and should look at how PMs, or whispers, may modify posts in a discussion forum.

In seeking to understand how the subculture concept can be used in Internet-based research, I was unable to give various other interesting phenomena specific

attention. The concept of community has received significant attention from sociologists studying cyberspace in the past decade and could have been used instead of subculture to achieve a different interpretive gloss on the data. Further, any of the traditional sociological variables could be applied to future research to help clarify the relationship between different types of people and Internet subculture participation. Analyses of race/ethnicity-, gender-, or age-related roles and categories could provide new insights into the how specific population segments use the Internet for subcultural participation, for example. I noticed while online that a number of straightedgers who gave out demographic information about themselves (for example when asked in a thread or through their avatar) reported being non-white and/or non-male. While traditional analyses of subcultures have often limited their research to race/ethnicity, gender, and age (Brake 1985; McRobbie and Garber 1976), research on the Internet may show that the composition of subcultural populations is more heterogeneous.

One aspect of this research was its focus on processes of identity making and on the communicative nature of subculture. Focusing on these processes necessarily moved me away from studying the subcultural life course of forum participants. Recent studies (e.g., Ward 1999) suggest that Internet users do not remain in one community very long – online participation is a tenuous phenomenon. One potentially fruitful area of future research might therefore be to analyze how online subcultural members experience forum life from beginning to end. Such research would need to focus on all stages of one's membership, from anticipatory socialization, through both formal and informal means of socialization, to their eventual exit from the forum . Such a suggestion is fraught with difficulties. For

example, how can potential participants be located as they first anticipate becoming a forum member? How can participants be tracked after they leave an online forum? In what ways is a cyberethnographic approach (ill-) suited for such research? Research should also focus on how other Internet subcultures shift over time, both in membership and normative structure.

Finally, in terms of resistance, this study has highlighted how subcultural participants construct mainstream youth and drug cultures. Images of the mainstream are little more than ideal typifications against which subculturalists react. David Muggleton (2000) 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” (p. 48). My exploration of a single straightedge forum on the Internet suggests that subcultural participants are still concerned with creating identities that locate them relationally to other subcultural participants and to the larger culture in which they find themselves. Thus perhaps the idea of a mainstream culture remains tenable only as a construct that subculturalists use to mark themselves as different. Future research should therefore focus on how other subcultural participants construct images of the mainstream, dominant culture, and outsiders, and to what purposes they apply them, to determine whether subculture is indeed becoming “less applicable.”

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1

### Informed consent form

Hello,

Thanks for considering being a part of my research on straightedge. My name is Patrick Williams (I am 'Patrick' in the forums) and I am studying straightedge on the Internet as part of my work as a graduate student at the University of Tennessee. There are few things that I want to tell you before we chat online, so I am sending you this page of information. Before we chat, you will need to send an email back to me at [patrick9@tennessee.edu](mailto:patrick9@tennessee.edu) telling me that you read it and that you agree to chat with me.

#### *Things you should know*

- The law says I can only interview people who are 18 years old or more. If you are under 18 years old, please let me know!
- Our chat will be part of my research on straightedge on the Internet.
- I will keep a copy of the chat session in order to be able to look back over everything we talked about.
- I may want to quote things you say during the interview or things you've said in the forums. Please tell me if you would like for me to use your username or create a fake username like "sxe001".
- No one besides me and perhaps my professor will ever see this chat. Anything you say is confidential and I will never give a copy of our chat to anyone else. This is to help you feel comfortable in answering questions and sharing your opinions.
- What I really want to know about are your experiences with straightedge, including your experiences both online and offline.
- You don't have to answer any question that you don't want to. Just tell me if you prefer not to answer a question.
- If you're not sure what I mean by a question, don't guess – just ask me what I mean.
- If you think there is something important that I don't ask or that we don't talk about, be sure to tell me about it. We can talk about anything you want in regards to straightedge or the Internet.
- I know that a lot of people have more than one thing going on at a time when they're online. But for this chat I would appreciate it if you would not multitask or chat with anyone else while we are chatting. I promise also not to chat with others while we are chatting. This way we can both concentrate on the interview and not be too distracted.
- I don't know how long the interview will take, but you if need to go before we are done and want to finish at a later time, just let me know.

If you want to speak to someone regarding my research or your participation or about your rights as a participant, contact of the Office of Research at my university or use the following resources:

Patrick Williams

Tom Hood

University of Tennessee's  
Institutional Review Board

patrick9@tennessee.edu

tomhood@utk.edu

blawson@tennessee.edu

011+36 62 424 618 (Hungary)

(865)974- 7023

(865) 974-3466

Now that you have read this, please send me an email (patrick9@tennessee.edu) and state the following:

1. whether you read this page;
2. whether you understand everything or if you have any questions;
3. whether you want me to use your username of another (you can provide a fake username in the email if you want);
4. whether or not you are at least 18 years old; and
5. your date of birth, your sex, your ethnicity or race, and where you live (city/state/country) [optional].

Thanks – Patrick Williams

## Appendix 2

### Basic interview schedule

Username  
Preferred pseudonym?  
Name  
Date  
Time  
Age  
Sex  
Ethnicity/race  
Location of interviewee

1. Do you label yourself as a straightedger?  
IF NO: a. If not, what would you call yourself?
  - b. What is the difference between straightedge and what you are?
  - c. Did you ever call yourself straightedge?
  - d. Why did you get out of the straightedge scene? (or) Why did you get away from the straightedge label?
2. Tell me about what **straightedge** means to you. I mean, when you think about the word straightedge tell me what comes to mind. Anything...
3. How much do you think your definition/opinion matches with other straightedgers?
4. If you had to label straightedge in terms of 'what is the big picture behind straightedge,' how would you describe it?  
If confused, probe w/continuum: individual philosophy vs. unified social movement.
  - 4a. Some people call it a scene, others don't. Are you into a **straightedge scene** or what?
5. What does it mean to be an active member of the straightedge scene?
6. How long have you been into the scene?
7. What do you think about people who are not straightedge
  - 7a. How would you describe youth culture, broadly speaking?



8. How did you actually **become** straightedge...can you describe **the moment** that you became straightedge.
  - 8a. Who or what influenced you to decide to become straightedge?
9. (IF THEY DON'T CALL THEMSELVES STRAIGHTEDGE NOW) When did you **quit being** straightedge...describe **the moment** that you quit being straightedge.
  - 9a. Who or what influenced you to decide to quit being straightedge?
10. What **percentage** of your friends are straightedge?
  - 10a. What percentage of your straightedge friends do you know **only** from the Internet?
11. How much about straightedge did you learn on the Internet?
  - 11a. How important is the Internet to you in terms of being a part of straightedge?
12. How important is the Internet to you in terms of your daily life?
  - 12a. Tell me a bit about how you use the Internet.
13. Who would you say are the key members of the straightedge online forums?
  - 13a. Why do you say that? How do you measure who is 'key'?
  - 13b. If you had to lump the members of the online forums into types of straightedgers, what would those groups be?
14. Why do you think it is that people come to the straightedge online forum in the first place?
  - 14a. How can you tell how involved a forum participant is in straightedge?
  - 14b. Does it matter to you whether non-straightedgers belong to the forums?  
Explain.
  - 14c. Do you benefit from reading what non-edgers have to say?
  - 14d. Why do you think it is that people tend to disappear from the forums after several months?
15. In your opinion, what are the **differences** between straightedge online and straightedge offline, **if** there are any?
16. To what extent would you say the two straightedge worlds (online and offline) overlap?

17. How would you describe the relationship between straightedge and the Internet?
18. Do you think that straightedge could exist **only** on the Internet? Why/not?
  - 18a. Do you think that music is a necessary part of straightedge? Why/not?
19. How much of a role do you think music played **in the beginning** of straightedge?
20. How much of a role do you think music plays in straightedge **now**?
21. What kind of music do you listen to now?
22. Have you been involved in or read any discussions about music on the online forums?
  - 22a. What do think about all the debates that people have about music and straightedge?
  - 22b. Is either side more 'right' than the other?
23. Do you have anything you would like to say about straightedge, drug free, or whatever?
24. Do you have any questions for me about this interview or about my research in general?

## Appendix 3

### QSR NUD\*IST node tree

#### Tree Nodes

##### (1) /Affiliation

- (1 1) / Affiliation /Individualistic
- (1 2) / Affiliation /Inclusive
- (1 3) / Affiliation /Exclusive
- (1 4) / Affiliation /Extreme
  - (1 4 1) / Affiliation /Extreme/Hardline
  - (1 4 2) / Affiliation /Extreme/HateEdge or Hatecore
- (1 5) / Affiliation /Group oriented
- (1 6) / Affiliation /Scene
- (1 7) / Affiliation /Losing the edge
- (1 8) / Affiliation /Outsiders
- (1 9) / Affiliation /Organizational
- (1 10) / Affiliation /Anti HC sXe
- (1 11) / Affiliation /Newbie
- (1 12) / Affiliation /Gang
- (1 13) / Affiliation /For life
- (1 14) / Affiliation /Community
- (1 15) / Affiliation /Religion
- (1 16) / Affiliation /Violence
  - (1 16 1) / Affiliation /Violence/Anti-violence
  - (1 16 4) / Affiliation /Violence/Pro-violence

##### (2) /'Rules'

- (2 1) /'Rules'/Ethics
- (2 2) /'Rules'/Hurting the body
- (2 3) /'Rules'/Drugs
  - (2 3 1) /'Rules'/Drugs/Cigarette
  - (2 3 2) /'Rules'/Drugs/Alcohol
  - (2 3 3) /'Rules'/Drugs/Marijuana
  - (2 3 4) /'Rules'/Drugs/'Narcs'
  - (2 3 5) /'Rules'/Drugs/OTC medication
  - (2 3 6) /'Rules'/Drugs/Other drugs
  - (2 3 7) /'Rules'/Drugs/Caffeine
  - (2 3 8) /'Rules'/Drugs/Ecstasy
- (2 4) /'Rules'/Sex
  - (2 4 1) /'Rules'/Sex/Pre-marital sex
  - (2 4 2) /'Rules'/Sex/Oral sex
  - (2 4 3) /'Rules'/Sex/Okay sex
  - (2 4 4) /'Rules'/Sex/Promiscuity
  - (2 4 5) /'Rules'/Sex/Alt-sexualities

- (2 4 6) /'Rules'/Sex/Pornography
- (2 5) /'Rules'/Animal rights
  - (2 5 1) /'Rules'/Animal rights/Vegan
  - (2 5 2) /'Rules'/Animal rights/Vegetarian
- (3) /Music vs Internet
  - (3 1) /Music vs Internet/Hardcore side
  - (3 2) /Music vs Internet/Internet side
  - (3 3) /Music vs Internet/A third side
  - (3 4) /Music vs Internet/Defining hardcore
  - (3 5) /Music vs Internet/Defining sXe
  - (3 6) /Music vs Internet/SXE versus drug free
- (4) /Internet
  - (4 1) /Internet/Other straightedge sites
  - (4 2) /Internet/Band websites
  - (4 3) /Internet/Straightedge info online
- (5) /Style
  - (5 1) /Style/Tattoos, piercings
  - (5 2) /Style/Hair, other body
  - (5 3) /Style/Clothing, stickers, patches
  - (5 4) /Style/'X'
  - (5 5) /Style/Username
    - (5 5 1) /Style/Username/From TV
    - (5 5 2) /Style/Username/Other
    - (5 5 3) /Style/Username/Music
    - (5 5 4) /Style/Username/Xs
    - (5 5 5) /Style/Username/Religion~Mythology
    - (5 5 6) /Style/Username/Real name
    - (5 5 7) /Style/Username/Subcultural affiliation
      - (5 5 7 1) /Style/Username/Subcultural affiliation/Punk
      - (5 5 7 2) /Style/Username/Subcultural affiliation/Straightedge
      - (5 5 7 3) /Style/Username/Subcultural affiliation/Vegan
    - (5 5 8) /Style/Username/Leisure
    - (5 5 9) /Style/Username/Emotional~Personal
    - (5 5 10) /Style/Username/Activist
- (6) /Music
  - (6 1) /Music/Origin
  - (6 2) /Music/Scene
  - (6 3) /Music/Bands
  - (6 4) /Music/Lyrics
  - (6 5) /Music/Hardcore
  - (6 6) /Music/Dance

- (7) /Definitions
  - (7 1) /Definitions/Straightedge
  - (7 2) /Definitions/Scene
  - (7 3) /Definitions/Hardcore

### Free Nodes

- 1 Community
- 2 DIY
- 3 Family, friends
- 4 Gender
- 5 Guns
- 6 Internet vs Music
- 7 Media
- 8 Member demographics
- 9 Member geography
- 10 Misc
- 11 Race
- 12 Religion
- 13 Research
- 14 Respect
- 15 Sig files
- 16 Stories
- 17 War

## Appendix 4

### Acronyms

BBS	Bulletin Board Systems are asynchronous, hierarchical Internet programs within which participants engages in various conversations. The primary level of a BBS is the menu page from which participants choose the forum(s) within which they will participate. The secondary level is made up of the thread menus within each forum; there are potentially hundreds or thousands of threads within a forum. The tertiary level is made up temporally-arranged posts.
CMC	Computer-mediated communication
DIY	Do It Yourself
f2f	Face-to-face
forum	Forums are broad categories within which participants engage in conversation. The conversations take place in threads within each forum.
IM	Instant Messaging (or) Instant Messenger (or) Instant Message
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
MUD	Multi-User Domain
NCT	New Communication Technology
OTC	Over-the-counter
post	A public message sent by a participant within a particular thread or forum. Posts may be 'cross-posted' (the same message copied-and-pasted to multiple threads) when the information relates to multiple topics.
PM	Private Messaging (or) Private Message
sig.file	Signature file – oftentimes the sender's contact information, affiliation, or a favorite quote – found at the end of a participant's post or email.
thread	A linear, asynchronous discussion within a forum. A single forum may have hundreds of threads that are concurrently accessed by participants.
whisper	A private message send from one user to another through the BBS's private messaging system.

## Vita

James Patrick Williams, Jr. was born in Nashville, TN on May 13, 1970. He grew up in Chattanooga, TN, where he attended the McCallie School. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga in 1993 with a major in Anthropology and a minor in World History. In 1999, he received his Master of Arts degree in Sociology from East Tennessee State University.

Patrick received training in graduate school as a social psychologist, and also studied in UT's Department of Cultural Studies. He has broad interests in subculture, identity, the Internet, and community.