

2005

# No, we don't have any t-shirts: Identity in a self-consciously consumerist punk subculture

William Force

*University of South Florida*

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"No, We Don't Have Any T-Shirts":

Identity in a (Self-Consciously) Consumerist Punk Subculture

by

William Ryan Force

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Donileen Loseke, Ph.D.  
Spencer Cahill, Ph.D.  
Laurel Graham, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
April 8, 2005

Keywords: authenticity, cultural capital, ethnography, meaning, social construction

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the professors who have dedicated their time, patience, red ink, black coffee, and Socratic energy to the completion of this project. I only hope that I have done your extensive instruction and even more extensive editorial remarks justice. Specifically, I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Donileen Loseke, my constructionist muse and academic mother, for giving me a new set of eyes through which to view the world.

This project would also have been impossible without the cooperation and acceptance of my three ethnographic informants and the countless others who comprise the Tampa punk scene. It is only fitting that the local music community which has given me so much over the past six years be the focus of my final work at this university.

Lastly, I wish to express my admiration for and debt to the music and lyrics of Orchid that first inspired my decision to take an academic look at punk rock. You and your ilk are a testament to the passion and energy that makes punk music a source of strength and growth. "When we move, it's a movement."

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"No, We Don't Have Any T-Shirts":  
Identity in a (Self-Consciously) Consumerist Punk Subculture<sup>1</sup>

William Ryan Force

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an ethnographic examination of a local punk subculture. Its focus is the processes of meaning construction and subcultural identity formation and maintenance. Through in-depth interviews and on-site observations, the meanings of punk emerge in acts of social co-construction. An empirical analysis of the ways by which individuals define and explore what is involved and valued in a punk identity provides insight into this subculture. The concept of punk as a social practice is investigated discursively through interviews and documented discussions. My goal is to uncover thematic ideas, beliefs, and values in these interactions that form a matrix of interlocking cultural expressions, collectively creating a shared subcultural identity.

As with any subculture, punk appears to be governed by a set of cultural codes and norms. The research reported here indicates that these themes are dominated primarily by knowledge displays and symbolic boundary maintenance. Accordingly, my study seeks to build upon previous work on identity display and subcultural boundary contests. Though

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this paper is borrowed from the song of the same name by the Massachusetts-based hardcore band Orchid, which appears on their *Gatefold* LP (2002).

one of punk's few "universal principles" is a purported anti-capitalism, consumerism and consumption play a pivotal role in the initiation, development, maintenance, and display of subcultural identity. Certain goods garner varying amounts of status, thus reflecting their position on a "hierarchy of goods" inside the subcultural system of meanings. In this way, my research illustrates and extends Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Baudrillard's analysis of the meaning conveying importance of commodities.

## **Introduction**

Although punk culture, in its varying forms, has attracted the attention of scholars (Fox 1987; Haenfler 2004; Traber 2001; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990), I would argue that none have offered an adequately empirical representation of the on-going accomplishment of this subculture. Particularly, it is important to understand a subculture's meaning to its own members, and their corresponding creation and maintenance of such meanings. In my own experience and involvement in the local "scene" (a term used to describe the network of individuals, artists, and supporters of punk art in a localized area) I have often found myself (and my peers) puzzled by the seemingly innocuous question of "what is punk?" Punk subculture is clearly a complex entity, often fragmented and varied, making it difficult to answer just "what punk is." A conveniently postmodernist response would be: "Punk means different things to different people, and it is up to those who consider themselves a part of the punk subculture to define it accordingly." Indeed, many members of the punk culture might find this answer fair and attractive. Even defining the term "punk" for the purposes of research is a difficult task. Here punk refers to a genre of rock music and the related cultural products and practices (symbols, rituals, and language) that constitute a distinct subculture. However, even classifying music as punk is a chore all its own; musical styles within the genre vary greatly.

Because of these very complexities and nuances, my primary research question at the onset of this project was "How is punk defined and understood by those who define

themselves as participants in the subculture?" Hence, there was no need to predefine the term and its constituent elements; punk's meaning would emerge inductively through empirical analysis of its social construction. What came to be of greater interest to me over the course of the research were the methods by which members of the punk culture construct their identity as punk and what it "means" to be punk.

By the question of punk's meaning, I refer to the personal, political, and philosophical characteristics and dimensions of the subculture as understood by its participants. Given punk's disparate manifestations and its members' slippery refusal to define it, punk's very existence as a singular entity is questionable. Through an empirical analysis of the ways by which individuals define and explore what punk is (and, of equal importance, what punk is not) a clearer image of this subculture may emerge. The methods employed in this study of punk can be viewed as "constructural," (Carley 1991, 332). That is, I sought out some common social practices that relate back to a shared identity. Worded differently, I looked for thematic ideas, common beliefs, and shared practices that form a matrix of interlocking cultural expressions that coalesce a seemingly fractioned and disharmonious group of individuals around a collective subcultural identity.

Though my study is certainly not autobiographical, I am undeniably a participant in it as well as its author. In his study of mortuary science students, Spencer Cahill used his own reactions during observation of these students' gruesome chores as evidence of his own lack of the proper "emotional socialization" for such a career (1989, 103). In contrast, I have conducted research on a group in which I actively participate, and my own

subcultural socialization is an effective, if not critical, source of information. My presence at the scene of investigation, and my status as a (relatively well-known) member of this scene makes this unavoidable. Though social scientists who attempt to tow the line of the natural, or "hard," sciences might question an insider's ability to provide an "objective" analysis of their own social group, Elijah Anderson has remarked that the attempt to "jettison the prism through which (we) typically view a given situation" obscures rather than illuminates the situation (1999, 11). Indeed, as Theodo Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia* (1984), "The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant." It is with this in mind that I have attempted to employ, at their appropriate times, either a respectfully distanced gaze or a self-consciously invested perspective on the punk "scene." As an insider-outsider, or a researcher with a "full member" role (Adler and Adler 1994), I have endeavored to remain self-reflective and intellectually focused when possible, and honest about my subcultural prejudices and intuitions. To gain as full a perspective as possible requires that I embrace my background knowledge, and it is for this reason that I have not attempted to fully divorce myself from my "punk" identity. Instead, I have woven it into my analysis in order to present a fuller, more detailed portrait of subcultural identity construction, defense, and management.

## **Locating Subculture**

In the course of my research, I avoided any tendency to try to cultivate a "unified representation" of the punk culture. Postmodern thinkers and their predecessors have argued that there can be no singular image/ideal of any social group. As Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman note, there is a tendency to depict subcultures as "homogeneous, static, and closed" (1979, 2). Yet, a subculture need not be based on some unchanging and rigid set of beliefs, values, and attitudes, but is often based on varied and fluid beliefs and practices. Such is the case with the punk culture, being composed of individuals who may identify with any variety of the offshoots and substyles (those artistic and cultural forms that are divergent, yet not sufficiently distinct enough to warrant a separate designation) found within punk. Such variation results in a subculture that can be viewed as highly "individualistic, fragmented, and heterogeneous" (Haenfler 2004, 408).

Paul DiMaggio observed that artists often "develop new styles to differentiate themselves from previous generations" (1987, 451). That may explain variations in style that occur within an artistic genre, fracturing a specific style into multiple "sounds." In punk culture, this phenomenon is responsible for the divergence between commercially viable forms of punk music and styles that have little appeal to mass audiences, and an even further shattering into subgenres (such as "hardcore," "grind," "crust," or "riot grrrl"). Borrowing from Bourdieu's analysis of the "social significance of taste," DiMaggio

claims that taste in art is a form of "ritual identification and a means of constructing social relations" (1987). It is for this reason that aesthetic sensibilities must be understood as somehow influential on social relationships and their display understood as *symbolic* in that it creates and verifies membership within a subcultural group through effective engagement of fashions, languages, and tastes that are prevalent and accepted. Fine (1987, 125) argues that we ought to think of cultures in general, and subcultures specifically, as behavioral in nature. Culture is not a fixed entity that is "out there" to be accessed or discovered; rather it is constructed and re-constructed constantly by practices and interactions among the individuals that comprise it as an "activity system." Sub/culture is something that is done. Cultural meanings are the result of symbolic exchange among individuals; this very concept that "people are the bearers of all meaning" suggests that we look to the members of a group to define their own sub/culture (Gotdiener 1985).

The location and origin of meaning inside a subculture potentially can be traced back to specific products consumed by a given group. The mods, a British youth subculture characterized by their fondness for R&B music and careful attention to dressing "sharply," who Hebdige (1988) studied were a subcultural group whose identity was largely rooted in "commodity choices that... marked themselves out" from other folks (147). Such discriminatory purchasing decisions can be wielded as models of expression, drawing distinctions between groups hungry to establish uniqueness and difference through a "larger unity of taste" that functions as a marker of distinction (Hebdige 1988, 148). The objects of choice then serve as signs, representative of a social group apart from

others and cohesive in that they share a specified appraisal of particular objects' meaning (Bourdieu 1989). These symbols transcend their economic value and function as referential tools to produce commonality based on a subculture's collective interpretation of their meaning.

These systems of meaning are formative to a subculture's existence; they delineate "not only the beliefs and values of social groups, but also their language, forms of knowledge, and common sense," in addition to providing the foundation for members' ritual engagement and use of these symbols (Hays 1994, 65). For example, Daniel Traber's (2001) study of the punk subculture in L.A. reveals the importance of "authenticity" to this group, and its foundations in "otherness" and difference (32). Though Traber's study, in part, attempts to define what punk "is," he does so by using secondary data and relies on accounts that have been canonized by sustained popularity. This method neglects the voices of the many individuals who constantly sustain that subculture through interactional and ritual performance in their everyday lives.

## **Locating Identity**

West and Zimmerman's (1987) ground-breaking analysis of gender undermined the notion of gender as a fixed or static social entity or identity. They meticulously analyze the way by which gender is accomplished interactionally, repeatedly, and quite often purposefully. West and Fenstermaker (1995) extend the original framework to include race and class. The implications of this framework have been far-reaching, and can be pushed even further. All identities can potentially be considered as the result of ongoing and routine accomplishments (West and Fenstermaker 1995), including those resulting from subcultural practices. If little boys and grown women "do" their gender, it only follows that police officers regularly "do cop" when around their police buddies on the "beat" or that punk kids might "do punk" around their peers and in the "scene." Indeed, any identity is reliant upon activities that can be viewed and assessed in terms of failure or success and are necessarily open to question and contestation. As West and Fenstermaker (1995, 21) put it, social identities are open to "the possible evaluation of action in relation to normative conceptions and the likely consequence of that evaluation for subsequent interaction." In Erving Goffman's terms, from whom these authors borrow, difference is not expressed, but produced. Though gender, race, class, and sexuality may be the most obviously fateful social differences, other social differences and identities are not unimportant. There are a variety of consequential ways to sort people inside of, outside of,

and between certain groups (be they punks, soccer players, academics, or art-house snobs).

Identity is very much a result of concerned effort and is accomplished constantly. Though the initiation or maintenance of an identity may not be the thrust behind social interaction, it is an inevitable by/product of it (Goffman 1967). Borrowing from Mead, Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2000, 424) maintain that "the self remains essentially a social structure, arising and flourishing... within social experience." They argue that the "self unfolds in and through social life" and that under postmodernity we need not desert the belief in a personal self but recognize that the personal is social. In talking and interacting with others our "self" becomes constituted, performed within the context of "recognizable identities" and "within the social contexts" (425) that are available. Our selves (identities) are contingent upon certain social groups and contexts (and their characteristic vocabularies and understandings), and by studying the circles of social life in which we engage we can gain a better understanding of how we come to exist. Whether conceiving of selfhood as an on-going accomplishment (West and Zimmerman 1987) or as a product of social engagement (Gubrium and Holstein 2000), it is imperative to look to the social environment for the evidence and acts of self-construction, including the construction of subcultural identities that counter and complicate the contemporary social landscape. We must look all around to understand how, to paraphrase Nietzsche (1974), we become who we are.

## **Locating Subcultural Identity**

The link between subcultural arrangements and the emphasis placed on distinction from and genuine resistance to what are viewed as oppositional cultural products and values are illuminated in Peter J. Aggleton and Geoff Whitty's (1985, 66) research on children of the new middle classes in English society. By exploring the production and reproduction of resistance among these youths, three sites (the educational, familial, and subcultural) are identified as giving rise to these formations. It is in the subcultural sites that the process of "personal authentication" takes place, constructing and reconstructing identity in a social way by selective means. In comparison to dimensions of the self that are impressed upon us (by occupation or genealogy), these identities are likely clung to more fiercely and more actively produced because of their voluntary nature. This is helpful in understanding the social creation of a subculture's meaning system, where "authenticity" seems to be essentially linked to identity. Authenticity means "doing" the identity correctly, convincingly, and consistently. Similarly, Adreana Clay (2003) indicates the use of subcultural ideals in establishing authentic identities among youth. Familiarity with subcultural forms provides a sort of "cultural capital" with which people arrange themselves in "hierarch(ies) among their peers" (Clay 2003, 1349).

Punk identity also frequently appears tied to perceived "commitment" or assimilation of shared values (Fox 1987; Haenfler 2004). Though values are most certainly

at play in creating and maintaining a punk identity (or a subcultural identity of any sort), ignoring the use and meaning of material objects quite possibly disregards a portion of identity work. As in Hebdige's (1988) description of the mods, consumption of specific material goods is key to one's membership in a group, and that group's establishment of shared difference. Kathryn Joan Fox's (1987, 345) study of the local punk scene in a major northeastern U.S. city indicated that "American punks have a more amorphous, less articulated ideological agenda" than punks in other historical or cultural moments, and so any study that focuses exclusively on the philosophical or political dimensions of the subculture would necessarily provide an incomplete portrait of it. Though Fox's study does reveal a very intentional and subculturally distinctive method by which punk kids stratify themselves and one another (1987), it does so almost exclusively in terms of "commitment" rather than including other equally salient criteria for such intra-group divisions.

The issue of subcultural identity is further explored in Ross Haenfler's (2004, 409) study of the straight edge movement, a variant of the punk subculture characterized by an ideology that promotes abstinence "from alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, and promiscuous sex." The straight edge scene shares an overlapping membership with the larger punk culture, yet is distinguished by philosophical and ideological ascetic practices. Therefore it only makes sense to look at the methods through which straight edge participants (or "sXers") develop personal meaning systems centered in the "core values" of the movement that links their subcultural status to resistance and difference (2004, 429-31). However,

when looking at punk as a whole, ideology might have a smaller impact. In any case, punks usually identify their musical performances as "shows" rather than concerts, and self-identify as "'kids,' no matter their ages" (see Haenfler's endnotes beginning on 432). It is for this reason that I have referred and will continue to refer to participants in this subculture as "kids," and their performance events as "shows."

## **The Cartography of Punk**

Given that my chief research goal was to understand acts of meaning-making among punk kids, my primary sources of data are on-sight observation of individuals and in-depth, open-ended interviews with members of the local punk community in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area. By interviewing and observing members of the culture the complexity of punk's defining characteristics may be best revealed. Through inductive study I hoped to reveal the core of the culture (or, better yet, allow it to reveal itself), specifically the operation of certain beliefs, practices, and artifacts in defining and accomplishing that subculture. It is by this method that I hope to illuminate the “negotiation of meaning” and the “production of socially constructed realities” that mark the development of a subculture’s fluctuating boundaries and identities (Fine and Kleinman 1979, 6).

My personal involvement as a member of the Tampa punk community provided me a level of access that might otherwise be unavailable or very difficult to secure. Furthermore, my acquaintance with the cultural symbols that are examined and studied here was a helpful starting point from which to engage in analysis. By using my "common sense understandings," in the best ethnomethodological sense, of the studied group I was able to compare and contrast the meanings and beliefs constructed in front of me with those that I held/hold as a member, adding an experiential level of careful examination to the analysis. Without this common sense knowledge, I would have been at a loss as to

where to begin my study, what locations to "scout out," and with whom to talk or to whom to listen. My personal experiences and knowledge served as a backdrop to the data I collected, deepening the analysis without turning into mere self-reflections.

Over the course of several months in late 2004 and early 2005, I visited multiple locations throughout the Tampa/St. Petersburg area in order to witness members of the punk subculture on their own terms (and on their own turf). These locations included the local venues known among members to host punk musicians' performances, such as the Orpheum, a small club with a full liquor bar situated on the periphery of the entertainment district of Tampa known as Ybor City, and the New World Brewery, a nearby pub-style bar. On over a dozen occasions I was able to visit these locations while performances were being held, allowing me an opportunity to observe several overlapping "types" of punk kids at once, including local punk artists/musicians, people indirectly engaged in producing the cultural products (those who host or "book" these events), and audience members. My presence at the scene seemed relatively unobtrusive because, as a member of the subculture, I was inconspicuous at best, a recognizable insider at worst. Many of my friends with whom I attended these events were fully aware that I was gathering information for a scholarly project "about punk," and would often help deflect any attention I attracted while jotting down notes. On one occasion, a bartender with whom I had become familiar approached me to take my drink order and asked what I was writing, to which someone in the group I was with responded, "Will's writing stories about punk kids. Do something funny."

After the bulk of my observational data was collected, I conducted three in-depth interviews with willing participants in the local punk scene (all white males, between the ages of 19 and 23) whom I had seen at several observational sites. One was a close friend of mine and the two others were introduced to me by mutual acquaintances. The interviews were conversational in nature. Rather than asking predetermined questions, I had general points to draw from when it suited the conversation, such as "When did you first get into punk music?" and "Do you think fashion means anything in punk?" Whenever possible, dependent upon circumstances and the willingness and consent of the participant, I tape recorded our conversations. These interviews were informal and conversational in style, allowing the participants to pursue topics of their own choosing. Often they felt we were "getting off the subject" when they started going into great detail about a particular show or band, but these "digressions" were often very helpful to my analysis. The information gleaned from these interviews essentially served as more detailed accounts of what I had already witnessed. The three in-depth interviewees (Jack, Daniel, and Kyle<sup>2</sup>, whom I will introduce at greater length later) serve the function of anthropological informants; their commentaries are used to clarify, filter, and interpret the observations. Though all three are similar in terms of age, gender, and race, they are fairly representative of the local scene which is predominantly male and almost exclusively white and young.

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<sup>2</sup> All people's names are pseudonyms.

### **"Yeah, but I need it on vinyl": The Hierarchy of Goods**

Though historically punk has been considered vaguely anti-capitalist, I observed a deep investment in the purchase and display of goods in the identity work of local punk kids. Many times at shows, I overheard statements indicating ownership of artistic products during discussion of bands: "Oh, Mastodon was just here? I have their last album on CD and vinyl, it's really good"; or, "Yeah, I know Murder by Death. I own that record"; or, "I bought the new Good Life (record), like, when it first came out." These statements, whatever their specific contexts, illustrate a frequent tendency of punk kids to publicize their possession of certain goods. It is because of the prevalence of such statements that I begin my analysis of the local punk subculture by discussing the central importance of artifacts.

Punk appears to be, much to punk kids' own occasionally vocal dismay, a consumer (sub)culture. This consumption serves multiple and interconnected purposes. First, in order to be familiar enough with the genre and its "important artists," one must consume the *art* (products of the artists on cassette tape, CD, vinyl, videocassette, or DVD). Specifically, one must own musical recordings of the "right" artists. Surface familiarity (song titles, artist names) and deep familiarity (lyrics, and who from *this* band has been in *that* band) are best acquired through exposure to the musical products, and this usually means buying records and CDs. However, the display of such knowledge obtained through contact with the music must then be displayed in inter-personal contacts;

it appears most directly involved in *maintenance* of identity once it has been initiated. In order to *establish* such an identity, it is important to acknowledge a second, equally important, consumerist dimension: acquisition of *artifacts* (non-art products relating to the genre and bands). These artifacts, which include pins and t-shirts, can be displayed easily so that anyone in the situation can recognize their bearer's possession of them (and their implicit social currency).

For example, if I am at a punk gathering, I can wear my Against Me! (darlings of the local punk scene) pin in order to be seen wearing it and, as such, be recognized as a fan or follower of that group. However, if other visual clues offer conflicting evidence, my "authenticity" in wearing this pin may be called into question. In such a case, someone might initiate an identity challenge in order to check my "scene credentials" by asking me if I had attended the most recent show of this band. For instance, if I not only have seen a specific artist perform several times but also own their "vinyl," I can confirm my identity. Better still would be if I was able to claim to own a *rare* version of a specific record. Such possession is meaningful not in the crass sense of monetary worth, but in its symbolic value, including its rareness, a symbolic value well understood in the culture. As Baudrillard (1969) has argued, today products of exchange serve as sign vehicles; their symbolic value is actually more pertinent (or "real") than the utility or use-value of the product in which it is embedded.

Though the use of vinyl records in punk appears to be a prime example of just such a social artifact, records clearly also have a use value (after all, we do *listen* to them) outside of being purely relational in significance. However, in line with conventional

American consumerism, the symbolic nature of the object cannot be understated; it is the "weight of signs that regulates the social logic" of punk culture (Baudrillard 1969, 59). Such objects are also sign vehicles in a second sense in that they convey information about the self (Goffman 1959) as if they are extensions of it. This is not particularly surprising if one considers how integral consumption is to American identity in general. Punk, as a subculture operating in the same physical and often social space as the dominant U.S. culture, appears to reflect certain dimensions of mainstream culture despite its oft-attributed resistance to it.

Further, ownership of both art and artifacts reinforce one another's symbolic value. Artifacts may offer an initial glimpse of subcultural status, but this status is in serious jeopardy if one cannot buttress it with sufficient knowledge which is, again, best acquired by direct and extended contact with the art itself. And, as noted previously, if the art one possesses is somehow rare (few copies were made, the copy one owns is of a limited press distinguished by a specific color, etc.), it further reinforces identity. Therefore, art *is* an important artifact; the two are inseparably connected. Though establishing an explicit hierarchy of which artifacts are superior (that it is to say more densely packed with identity currency) is difficult, rare or limited edition vinyl appears to be "better" than regular (black, non-numbered, not limited) vinyl and vinyl is generally "better" than the CD format. A record procured at a show indicates that you attend performances, so that is preferred over purchasing a record through mail-order or in-store. Buying by mail-order displays familiarity with important record labels, but local stores that sell recordings of meaningful bands are generally few in number and known only among the punk kids, so

determining the rank of these methods of acquisition on the hierarchical chain is quite difficult. In short, where you buy a recording, what you buy, and what variety you buy all say very much about your punk identity.

Jack, a 20 year-old with shaggy black hair and horn-rimmed glasses, is a fixture of the local scene because of his participation in several bands and his frequent attendance at local events. In one exchange, Jack and I were riding in his car listening to music on his CD player when we began talking about the underground punk band Panthers. I expressed my appreciation for their album "Things are Strange" and told Jack that I nearly purchased it on double-12" vinyl format the day before (I did not because the corners were upturned, and who wants a damaged identity marker?):

J: Yeah, that album's pretty word.<sup>3</sup> I need to get it.

W: I saw it at your house.

J: Yeah, but I need it on vinyl.

W: Why? You already have it.

J: Yeah, but not on vinyl.

When pressed for an explanation, Jack said that vinyl is superior to CDs because "you get cool shit like free posters, the artwork is bigger, and anyone can burn (make a CD replicate of) an album and download the art off the internet, but you can't fake vinyl." The distinction was not based on sound-quality or other aural factors directly related to the music itself, but on the visual aesthetic and the "authenticity" of the record format. You just cannot "fake it." Kyle, a 19 year-old college student who hops between the Gainesville and Tampa punk scenes, also clearly expressed his preference for the vinyl

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<sup>3</sup> "Word" is used here in a way that is a synonym for "good." Although specialized language can serve as an important aspect of exploring a given subcultural group, I chose to focus my analysis on identity maintenance on the more general use of knowledge, beliefs, and practices.

format: "It kinda makes you feel, like, more involved in punk rock... It's just the thought that, like, only punk people have vinyl anymore. It means you're part of punk. So you can say, 'Oh, yeah, I own records.'" He also calls himself a "vinyl purist." I also spoke at length with a 22-year old local musician and photographer named Daniel who explained that he did not have a particular fondness for vinyl, but it was important to own certain bands' recording on that format (he specifically mentioned the Hi-Fives), echoing Jack's assertion that one of the 12" format's desirable traits is the larger, more detailed artwork that accompanies it.

However, simply owning records is not enough to establish a punk identity. People need to know you own records, and "good" ones at that. Jack, for example, told me that a few weeks prior to our conversation he had gone to a party at a friend's house who is known locally as Black Cory. Cory was showing off his record collection because he wanted to trade records, during which he revealed what Jack referred to as his "pièce de résistance" -- a 7" record by indie punk band Braid of which only 100 copies exist. Jack said he didn't really care for Braid, but it was pretty "cool" nonetheless. Jack claimed to be unimpressed because he does not like Braid very much, and because he owns "plenty of records that there are, like, only a few copies of. Like my Decemberists record, I think there's only 120 or somethin'." Despite his feigned non-chalantness, Jack confessed that he previously had felt anxious that Cory might think his record collection "sucked," believing Cory's to be far superior, and was relieved when someone told him that Cory thought his record collection was "pretty decent."

This very conspicuous consumption was not limited to Jack and Cory. One day, as

I browsed through a local record store/skateshop, where kids purchased both skateboard gear and music, I witnessed the following interaction between two kids wearing nearly identical outfits of very form-fitting black t-shirts and dirty jeans:

A: Oh man, they've got "I Know a Girl." I been wanting to get it.

B: The first pressing comes on neon pink (vinyl). I have that.

A: (slides record out of sleeve) Oh, it's purple.

B: Yeah, too bad.

On another occasion, a friend was at my apartment flipping through my record collection when he realized that I had two copies of the same Piebald 7", one on white vinyl and one on blue. When he asked why I had two, I (embrassingly) admitted that the white one was a tour copy (often, bands will release a different version or pressing of an already released record in support of their tour), but I bought the blue version at a local record store a few months later because it was "hand numbered." To this, my friend jokingly raised his right hand in the air and said, "Guilty," implying that he too had purchased multiple copies of a record for a similar reason.

## **"Don't be that guy": Rules, Philosophy, and Maintenance**

Though familiarity with music and the desirable formats on which to procure it are important in order to carry on meaningful conversations among members, visual displays of identity are also common (or even critical). The vast majority of attendees at local punk events wore a band name or logo of some sort, be it in the form of t-shirts, sweatshirts, hats, or patches and pins (buttons) affixed to the aforementioned items. Males were slightly more likely to wear actual band shirts and baseball caps, whereas females often wore "mainstream" clothes, but altered them by wearing them extra-tight (sometimes by tearing out the original seams and re-stitching them with either thread or shoe-strings) and/or adding band paraphernalia such as pins and patches. Both males and females consistently wore tight fitting pants and tops, contributing to what Fox characterized as the homogeneous androgyny of punk appearance (1987). Interestingly, this androgyny also was consistent with body types -- both females and males were overwhelmingly thin, possibly reflecting another dimension of conventional modern American culture.<sup>4</sup>

There were any number of common sartorial elements at the shows and gatherings I attended, including black t-shirts (often emblazoned with the logo or name of a band), form-fitting jeans (Diesels are a particularly popular name-brand), white patent leather belts, and hooded sweatshirts adorned with band pins, to name a few. Certain hair styles

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<sup>4</sup> Not to say that thinness is the statistical norm in contemporary U.S. culture (far from it), but that it remains a prerequisite for being accepted as conventionally beautiful.

were also very common. Among women it was common to see dyed black hair with bold blonde chunks, bangs down past the eyes, and the back styled intentionally to look messy and disheveled. During observation I heard this hairstyle described in a number of ways, including "scene cut" or "scene hair," or "just-been-fucked hair" (so-called because the front portion was relatively well-kept in comparison to the rear, as if one had been rolling around on their back for sometime). Local band Crayons (whom label themselves "proto-punk" on local fliers) laments, "It used to be that I was one of a kind/It used to be that I would never fall in line/But now the kids they're kinda like me/Whatever happened to my identity?" (2004). As suggested by these lyrics, the ubiquity of such conventions are not lost on subcultural insiders; I often heard conversations where comments such as "Oh shit, here comes the white belt mafia" (in reference to a small group of girls all wearing the aforementioned item) were surprisingly common. When entering a bar or club where live bands were scheduled to perform, I frequently heard a member of a group say something like "Uh-oh, I forgot to wear my black shirt. The scene police are gonna kick me out." Such self-derision is consistent with the prevailing attitude towards appearance standards I witnessed: they are to be simultaneously obeyed and mocked. Participants in the subculture reflexively make jabs at their own conformity on a regular basis, saying things such as, "Check me out, I'm wearing the uniform." Yet, these acts of self-deprecation underscore their awareness of and orientation to the rules which constitute, to borrow from Edward Sapir (1949, 556), "an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all."

Kyle indicated that along with purchasing vinyl albums, buying "your first pair of

Doc Martens,” a brand of work boots, is sometimes seen as a rite of passage for punk kids allowing them to feel that they are “part of the style now.” Though Doc Martens were less-than-prevalent in my observations, Kyle and I were both wearing a specific brand of footwear during this interview: Converse All Stars. Malcolm Gladwell (2000, 360) observes that these specific sneakers are the “signature shoe of the retro era.” They are now a hallmark of punk fashion as well. Daniel, who is known for frequently dressing immaculately in a suit (complete with home-made band pins on the lapel and Converse on his feet to punk it up, of course), spoke to me at length about his new reluctance to purchase these specific shoes because the company has recently been acquired by Nike. Converse were valued in the scene for their somewhat “underground” status and now that they had been “bought out,” part of this value had been lost, revealing a possible link between clothing and its implied political/philosophical meaning.

An example of the growing resistance to Converse sneakers' omnipresence occurred at a show I attended late one Friday night. I was dressed in the "standard" garb, but had worn flip-flop sandals rather than closed-toe sneakers when a female in her early twenties wearing loose-fitting clothing and a pair of flip-flops kicked her feet at mine and remarked, "Shit yeah, flip-flops are what's really punk. Fuck Converse." Here it would seem that, since anti-conformity is quintessential punk, rebelling against the punk uniform is what's "really" or authentically punk, indicating a self-conscious awareness of a necessary fluidity of dress standards. This, perhaps, is the impetus to constantly move from one fashion trend to another; much like attempting to remain "cool," remaining punk involves a permanent state of flux (Gladwell 1997).

The idea of "scene cred" or "scene points" was frequently invoked in discussions of one's public appearance. For instance, while standing near a merchandise table at a hardcore punk show a very tall, very thin young woman with obviously dyed black hair styled in a "scene cut" yelled across the room to a male friend, who was wearing an oversized belt buckle in the shape of a large gun, "The ironic belt buckle is out, dude! You're losing scene points so bad!" Sometimes, scene points would be (ironically) awarded to another, such as in the following exchange between a muscular, tattooed young male with a full beard (L) and his smaller, more lean friend wearing a tight, red t-shirt and designer jeans (D):

L: Nice jeans, asshole. Ten points.

D: Yeah, what can I say?

L: You can say you're a scene kid.

The "award" of the scene points was reluctantly accepted in a defensive sheepish manner as his friend continued to amiably mock him as a "scene kid." The "scene kid" is viewed as the ultimate embodiment of all the fashion standards, one who tightly adheres to them as if his or her social life depends on them. And, in a way, it does. But the scene kid is a negative type because s/he appears to conform *too* much to the clothing standards. On a few occasions I encountered people assigning/rejecting this label. During one of the few cold evenings in my data collection, two teenage males were standing outside a venue smoking cigarettes. One was dressed in a grey hooded sweatshirt layered under a denim jacket (A) and the other was wearing a zip-up sweater decorated with several pins and a patch of cloth bearing a screen-printed band logo (B):

B: I can't believe you're rocking the hoodie-jean jacket combo. You're such a scene kid.

A: Fuck that, I'm just cold.

B: (exhales smoke from the side of his mouth while muttering) Scenester.

When I overheard the label “scene kid” (or its equivalent “scenester”) being verbally bestowed, it was accepted only once, and then with mocking condescension. A young woman who was called a "scenester" extended her arm out, and placing her outstretched middle finger very close to her friend's face said, "Oh yeah, I'm a scenester. I forgot."

In terms of displaying artifacts, simply wearing a t-shirt, hat, patch, or pin is not enough; you must know what to wear where. Local fliers complain that “it’s spelled ‘scene’ not ‘seen’,” yet most folks appear hesitant to violate the rules. One of the most fiercely enforced “rules” is that you do not display products of the group whose performance you are attending. If you are going to band X's show, for instance, you refrain from wearing a shirt or hat with band X's logo on it. I often observed one member of a group chiding another, saying "Don't be that guy, man." I overheard the following discussion between two friends at a local show; the scheduled performance had begun later than was advertised (a notoriously common scenario in the local subculture I was studying) and one young man was holding a shirt which he had obviously purchased earlier in the night:

A: Man, I'm sick of carrying around this fucking thing (the t-shirt in his hand).

B: Just put it on, then.

A: No way. I don't want to be that guy.  
(they both begin to laugh)

"That guy" is an individual (of either gender) who breaks this specific rule of dress.

For example, Jack was explaining to me why he was wearing a mesh baseball cap with an American flag embroidered on it. Jack frequently wears hats with his low-slung jeans and variety of band shirts, but I had never seen this particular cap on him before. The hat, which he found abandoned in the backseat of his automobile, offered a quick fix for a potentially embarrassing situation: "I was gonna wear my Darkest Hour hat, like I always do, but then I realized I was going to their show that night. And this hat (on his head) had a little puke in it, but I was like, 'Fuck it.'" I later expressed my amusement at how important the "that guy" rule was, but he discounted my interpretation: "Nah, that's not it. Puke's just not a big deal. I'm a scummy guy."

Disdain was also expressed toward folks who were evaluated by others as trying to slyly circumvent this unofficial policy. At a show by Nebraska-based "post-punk" band Cursive, I heard two young men chiding a third person from some distance for wearing a shirt bearing the logo of the band The Good Life. The Good Life is fronted by singer Tim Kasher, who is also the singer for Cursive. Therefore, in these two young men's estimation, the fellow wearing this shirt was still apparently guilty of violating the "that guy" rule:

A: Nice shirt, dick.

B: Yeah. You're real cool. Now he (the singer) knows how hip you are.  
(they both laugh)

B: Nobody else here knows he's in The Good Life. Real slick.

These two men appeared to be serving as the "scene police" discussed in an earlier quote. They are the rare, but hostile enforcers of the rules. It is ironic to note, though, that they engaged in such policing only at a volume that the people immediately around them

could hear and the person whom they were chiding could not. It was as if they were trying to display their own knowledge of the rules, and violations of them, more than attempting to enforce them.

I asked Daniel what visual clues might indicate one's membership in the subculture: "I don't know because I take it for granted. I don't look. I don't care. It's something I'm so used to." Once again, the rules and standards for appearance are practically understood but unarticulated. Daniel's remarks also support the claim that punk is something that is actively accomplished by conscious effort; according to him: "With guys you can usually tell right away, they're pretty straight-forward. But girls, they have their preppy days and their punk days." As with Spencer Cahill's example of the young girl who did boy one day and girl another by "altering her personal front," (1989, 287) the identity of punk can apparently be switched on and off by manipulating one's "personal front." Changing uniforms (from "preppy" to "punk" or vice versa), however unofficial they may be, greatly affects how one is socially perceived.

### **"I like their earlier stuff more": Distinctions, Boundaries, and Display**

Jockeying for social status or “scene cred(entials)” involves conspicuous displays of important and esoteric knowledge in interactions. Kyle talked of the use of "scene cred," otherwise called "scene points," in contending for status and respect when we were discussing a particular incident of which we had mutual knowledge. I had mentioned hearing some time ago about an individual who was selling Orchid (a now-defunct hardcore punk band from Amherst, Massachusetts) pins and stickers online and asking a very high price for them (four or five dollars for three pins). Members of that band and several others whose paraphernalia was being similarly sold through on-line auctions retaliated by e-mailing this person with the demand that he cease such actions, and insisted on publicly available internet message boards that no one purchase what he had for sale. Kyle immediately recognized the situation and commented, “Well, to show a little bit of scene cred, I can tell you I was on Viva La Vinyl when that drama went down.” Kyle displayed his savvy (or “cred”) not only by indicating his use of Viva La Vinyl, a popular internet message board used to trade and auction records (among other things), but also having firsthand knowledge of what had become a sort of subcultural legend.

Though Kyle’s and my exchange would not be characterized as hostile by any means, it was competitive. People often engaged in one-upmanship at the sites where I observed, be they public or private. Kids at shows and in homes would, during their discussion of music, take turns in throwing information back and forth as if they were

trying to have the last word on the matter. One such contest between two kids listening to the music broadcast over the speaker system during a break between bands at a local show went as follows:

A: Hot Hot Heat (the band playing over the sound system) is so good.

B: Do you have their first record?

A: Yeah, it's really good.

B: Their new one comes out in March.

A: Right.

Though they both recognized the artist whose music was playing (one identity marker), B attempted to one-up his friend (A) through a display of what might be knowledge the other did not possess -- knowledge of an older recording. When it turned out that this knowledge was common to them both, he then offered another fact that might trump his friend's knowledge -- that of a yet-to-be-released recording. Again rebuffed, the match ends; the conversational contest failed to result in either individual's inflation or deflation of identity. It is in such situations that familiarity (casual or, preferably, intimate) with the group's artistic products comes into play. One may be able to hold his or her own in a contestation of identity by displaying knowledge evaluated as adequate (and hopefully impressive). Furthermore, one cannot be sure that a conversational partner actually has been exposed to a band's earlier work or if s/he actually has knowledge of an upcoming album; the crucial point is that those in the subculture know enough about the rules to act as if they do. Though in the above cited conversation neither was able to "out-punk" the other, the very fact that they engaged in such a competitive exchange indicates their awareness of expectations: to be able to carry on a conversation about a given band, recording label, show, or the like.

Inquiries about another's familiarity with a band's "first record" are common to punk interactions in the scene. I frequently encountered people displaying familiarity with a band's "earlier stuff" in what could be understood as an attempt to garner status. For example, Daniel commented that "Some kid is always looking for something new to prove he's better. So later when they get popular he can be, like, 'Oh I knew that band before. Now they suck.'" Indeed, it is hard to count how many times during my observations I overheard statements such as "I like their earlier stuff more" when two or more individuals would be discussing music. During another interaction at the pub, two kids at a table were discussing the music playing on the jukebox (the newest album by the band Modest Mouse):

A: This record's got some good songs on it, but "Sad Sappy Sucker" is way better.

B: Really? I like this one a bunch.

A: Yeah, it's ok. But their older shit is better. Everybody should listen to old Modest Mouse.

When I first brought up the idea of the "earlier stuff" phenomenon to a group of my peers, many of them began laughing and remarking that "most bands' stuff gets worse over time." A friend dressed in his typical knee-length baggie shorts and hooded sweater said, "Most bands only have enough good ideas for one record. They should just quit after that." Someone else in the group chimed in, "Yeah, why do you think all the mid-nineties screamo bands break up after the first 7 inch (record)." This last statement not only displayed a working knowledge of the "earlier stuff" distinction, but also familiarity with a specific part of punk history: the explosion of a subgenre known as "screamo" hardcore punk in the late 1990s. Many people displayed their prowess in band trivia during

conversations by being able to tell you which bands were on what label, which bands had "ex-members" of other seminal acts, who had toured with whom, and similar esoteria. One day while spending time with Jack in his apartment, he tried to introduce me to a band I had not heard of (another popular way of displaying your mastery over punk):

J: Have I played this band for you? They're kinda cheesy, but they're okay.

W: Are they ex-members of anybody?

J: No, not that I know of. They're on Victory, though.

Following this conversation, I immediately realized the "automatic" nature of my question -- I, as a member of the subculture, took the "band knowledge" game for granted. Punk is intensely competitive in nature, relying frequently on "social comparisons" via "competitive consumption" (Schor 1999, 448). In another observation at a friend's house party, two kids were flipping through the host's record collection (remember those?):

A: What is Pinhead Gunpowder like? (he picks up a 7" record)

B: It's the dude from Green Day's other band.

A: Oh.

(they go on to discuss Green Day's records)

Later that evening, I saw two different kids sitting on a couch in the living room with beers in hand, when one kid (F) reached over to pick up a CD that was laying on the coffee table:

E: That's Gravenhurst's album. It's really cool. Kind of folky. A creepy, folky thing.

F: (looking at the back of the CD case, where track titles are usually listed) Oh, they cover a Husker Du song.

E: Yeah, it's pretty sweet.

Over and over throughout the evening, and in other locations at other times, I

heard people turn to one another (or to me) and pose inquiries such as “Have you heard the new Blood Brothers?” or “That Hot Water Music album sucks, doesn’t it?” Music (whether being currently listened to or not) is a constant source of discussion, and you had better be adequately prepared to talk punk if you want to remain comfortable in the situation. After all, you do not walk into a Picasso gallery and ask the museum attendant whether the displayed work is Impressionist. Familiarity with punk art forms is of chief importance in maintaining face, or positive social value, in group contexts, and talking knowledgeably about it is a constant form of face-work (Goffman 1967).

Based on my observations and interviews, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1989, 16) notion of “social distance,” whereby people construct hierarchies within a social or cultural space and barriers between the strata, can be applied to punk subculture. By wielding knowledge of (or a “taste” for) a given artist’s older albums, certain people employ the “relative weight of the different species of [subcultural] capital” (Bourdieu 1989, 17). Such “punk capital” is used within its amaterial subcultural walls as a measuring stick of identity and status, enticing (if not mandating) participants in the subculture to enter a game of status competition by consuming tangible and intangible punk goods and parading knowledge in a display and negotiation of self.

### **Conclusions: "Keepin' the scene alive"**

One of the main goals of this research was to develop a clearer understanding of what it means to be punk, the importance and place of authenticity within this subculture, and the process of meaning-making in a postmodern subculture where identity appears to be centrally valued while being simultaneously problematized. Arguably, by revealing the intricacies of meaning making and identity construction within this particular subculture, we gain a fuller understanding of subcultures and corresponding identities more generally. All cultures (and subcultures) are socially created and their exploration must address the processes of their creation. The voices of participants must not be silenced or ignored; they are the cultural creators. My study acknowledges the agency of those social actors who create and recreate the punk subculture through the practices and knowledge employed in that endeavor.

What is clear in this study is that punk identities (and quite possibly all identities under postmodernity) are the result of careful and conscious maintenance. Identity in our modern era has surely been altered by a healthy dose of disdain toward romantic and modernist discourse, but the lack of a permanent or fixed self does not mean that we enter into social relationships with reckless abandon. Far from it. Punk kids reflexively poke through the fabric of their selves, maintaining a precarious balance between self-aware attempts to maintain face and mocking the game in which they participate. However, they

(or we, or I) do not treat selfhood merely as a "posture to be punctured by sophisticated self-consciousness" (Gergen 1991, 194) but as a thoughtful endeavor. Punk kids exemplify Kenneth Gergen's model of "serious play" by underscoring the contextual and relational nature of their selves, turning punk "off" temporarily at times or inserting psychic distance long enough to sarcastically critique it. They recognize their own participation in an "infinite game" (195) full of constantly changing rules and expectations which they engage with playful seriousness. It is such a treatment of self that punctuates our current era more generally.

Of course, central to meaning and identity in punk is the interactional employment of (sub)cultural currency. Taking care not to misuse or confuse Bourdieu's original concept of cultural capital, as Lamont and Lareau caution against (1988), I refer to the distinction markers employed among punk youth as "subcultural capital." Though such a semantic distinction might seem pedantic, the term subcultural capital taps more specifically into the forms of discrete knowledge that members of a subculture (or those who attempt to feign membership) use only among themselves. Subcultural capital is frequently used as a way of distinguishing themselves from outsiders and the means by which they hierarchically carve up their own group. You are either "in" (you have the capital) or you are "out" (you do not). Paralleling Bourdieu's concept, this subcultural capital is often used to mark status, delineate superior from inferior tastes, signal successful mastery over aesthetic rules, and the like among punk kids. However, it diverges from Bourdieu's original conception in that it does not appear to be used as a

form of ideological or (indirect) material domination, nor does it frequently translate into economic profit. Rather, a large amount of subcultural capital yields a symbolic profit: high status in the group.

Within any given system of tastes and practices, or what Bourdieu called "habitus," there are designations and prioritizations among objects that are mutually understood to be socially meaningful (Bourdieu 1989). The social emphasis given to "earlier stuff" is one method by which distinctions are made, as are an awareness of which types of goods to procure, when to display such mutually meaningful artifacts, and possession of the right forms of knowledge gleaned from these artifacts in order to have intelligible discussions about punk music. Though where punk "starts" and "stops" was not made clear in my data, Michèle Lamont (2002, 98) suggests that such boundaries might have shifted before this written work sees the light of day: "symbolic boundaries -- the types of lines that individuals draw when they categorize people" are fluid and permeable. The locations of such transitory lines are not the point of interest in this study; the way such lines are drawn, however, is. "Cultural boundaries... drawn on the basis of education, intelligence, manners, tastes, and command of high culture" (Lamont 2002, 98) are present in some variety in every sub/cultural group (though one might replace "high" with pop or folk culture depending on the group), and an individual's sense of self rests upon an ability to successfully learn such precarious social maps and navigate accordingly. For instance, by following the rules well enough to not be "that guy" and avoiding the social impression of over-attention to the rules (making you a "scenster"), punk kids maintain a balanced and

viable social identity. Even knowing what “that guy” or a “scenster” is means you are halfway there. Being well versed about certain bands prevents you from engaging in a subcultural faux pas such as wearing a Coalesce shirt to a Get Up Kids show (after all, the drummer from Coalesce is the keyboardist for the Get Up Kids). And if somebody mentions a band you have never heard of, it is safe to claim that you like their first album *way* more than their recent work; just like the old academic adage that, when someone mentions a philosopher or author you know nothing about, just slide back in your chair while puffing on your cigarette and say with stuffy pretension, “Well, I found their argument to be rather sophomoric and obtuse, didn’t you?” Oh, and never tell anybody that you went out of your way to learn this stuff... that would be *so* not punk.

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