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The art of authenticity: a rhetorical critique of Internet subculture message boards

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Introduction

I'll tell you what punk isn't – it isn't a fashion, a certain style of dress, a passing 'phase' of a knee-jerk rebellion against your parents, the latest 'cool' trend or even a particular form or style of music, really – it is an idea that guides and motivates your life. The Punk community that exists, exists to support and realize that idea through music, art, fanzines and other expressions of personal creativity. And what is this idea? Think for yourself, be yourself, don't just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your own life (Anderson, handout, 1985).

Authenticity in the modern day life is often determined before the societal member knows that they are performing. Every day, millions of Americans wake up and begin the act of rhetorical ideology performance. Some play the role of mother, son or boss. But others are confused by the idea of identity and the belonging to a group of 'others,' particularly when the organization with which they are associating is not part of the mainstream. The above quote from a member of Positive Force DC, a social change organization, sums up the problems and performance of identity within a subculture. Authenticity is determined by the subculture's definition of what is "normal" performance for a group member and what isn't. Thus, an ideology of subculture is a "means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups assert their distinctive character and affirm they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass" (Thornton, 1996, p. 10). This is not a problem for mainstream culture, as cultures of belonging allow for some differentiation among members while still maintaining acceptance within the group. This is different in countercultures – groups that come to fruition as "mass movements...triggered at least as much by developments in mass culture as changes at the grass roots" (Frank, 1997, p. 8). These cultures are a collection of individuals who create existence based dually on rejection from the mainstream by participating individuals, and personal desire to be different. In a counterculture, the strictest guidelines must be followed in order to maintain a societal relationship with the culture they want to be affiliated with. This presents conflict and confusion often arising from members who wish to obtain some of the distinction present within a culture, but do not wish to accept all of the subcultural responsibility. This is where the confusion between authenticity and poseurs arises.

In order to adequately examine the ideological rhetoric of countercultures and online existence, I will present my research as follows. I will begin by explaining my academic

background and study of subcultures, authenticity and research into the body of legitimized punk allows me to pursue this type of research. Next, I will describe how the data was gathered and how it relates to the ideology of the subculture. I will also display the need for a new approach based on subculture practices and the constraints present in the medium of the Internet. In the discussion section, I will compare and contrast authentic members of the subculture and their practices online against those of inauthentic others in identity demonstration.

Literature Review

To accurately explain the significance of identity performance within a subculture, we must first define the word ‘subculture’ and explore significant texts related to this study. Subcultural studies are the exploration of the underground, based upon things not necessarily thought of as ‘cultured’. Many subculture movements involve rejection from mainstream society and the glorification of cultural values in a new collective culture that has the same social attitudes, beliefs and values, built around a shared experience.

We are interested in subculture – in the expressive forms and rituals of these subordinate groups – the teddy boys and mods and rockers, the skinheads and punks – who are alternately dismissed, denounced and canonized; treated at times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons...we are intrigued by the most mundane objects – a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle – which, none the less, like the tube of Vaseline, take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile (Hebdige, 1979, p. 2).

These tokens of society and identity that become associated with certain cultural movements are called cultural capital. In the United States, cultural capital among the mainstream society can be seen as anything giving status that is readily available; prominent examples in today’s society might include a pair of designer tennis shoes or an iPod. However, there is a significant difference between subcultural capital from a spectacular subculture and cultural capital from the mainstream culture, as “the media are a primary factor governing the circulation of the former” (Thornton & Gelder, 1997, p. 203). Through the media, the subculture is exposed, eventually steamrolling into a full-fledged cultural movement and creating confusion among what is authentic culture and what is not, particularly among fashions. Subcultural capital is not something that is to be bought and sold, which makes any mass-produced form of capital immediately part of mainstream culture. Another difference comes from meaning and acceptance within the culture itself, as subcultural capital “confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder” (Thornton, 1996, p. 11). Thornton’s idea translates to the fact that in subcultures, capital only works when it is recognized as appropriate and accepted by the members of the culture itself. These culture capital designations are given in order to allow all members who truly wish to belong to achieve these means, no matter their background or at what point they are starting their subcultural journey from: subcultural capital is “the linchpin in an

alternative hierarchy in which the axes of age, gender, sexuality and race are all employed in order to keep the determinations of class, income and occupation at bay” (Thornton, 1996, p. 105). This relates to all members of the subculture, as those characteristics can make anyone a member without allowing for distinctions based on material issues in mainstream society.

In keeping normal societal determinants out of the discussion of what is appropriate culture, the need then arises for definition of authenticity within the subculture itself. Authenticity, defined by Sabin, is an extremely complex and elusive concept – a “view of authenticity assumes that there is a central ‘pure’ core in any given field, which is then dissipated by a series of less authentic, and therefore ‘lesser’ practitioners” (Sabin, 1999, p. 82). Inauthentic punk is a “commercialized and debased form of an original ‘street’ form of punk” (Sabin, 1999, p. 83); that is to say it is anything not fitting into all the facets of the subculture’s definition of authentic. This authentic discussion is especially important to subcultural practice among members and distinction of those who belong versus outsiders who only wish to engage in the parts of the culture they find appealing.

This leads to the discussion of ‘punk’ and the rhetorical constitution of identity among members. Punk began as a movement in London in the 1970’s, led by young men who felt the need to distance themselves in society or those who were bored with the culture of the mainstream. In *Subculture: the meaning of style*, Dick Hebdige chronicles the beginnings of punk as a merger between reggae and rock, wrought with social consciousness and realization of the notion of ‘accepted’ rejection:

By the early 70s, these tendencies had begun to cohere into a fully fledged nihilist aesthetic and the emergence of this aesthetic together with its characteristic focal concerns (polymorphous, often willfully perverse sexuality, obsessive individualism, fragmented sense of self, etc.) generated a good deal of controversy amongst those interested in rock culture...In punk, alienation assumed an almost tangible quality. It could almost be grasped. It gave itself up to the camera in ‘blankness’, the removal of expression, the refusal to speak and be positioned (Hebdige, 1979, p. 28).

Danger came in the form of commercialization. Like any subculture, the mainstream eventually found redeeming value in the notion of marketed rejection. For example, in the “mid 1980s, punk rock [was] in danger of being taken for granted...its meaning is that established through the consensus of users in the 1976-8 period” (Laing, 1985, p. viii). Thus, due to the confusion among

what was authentic punk and what was merely pretend due to further growth and exposure to mainstream society, the subculture developed a rigid constitution of values, held the world over as necessary requirements to belong to the culture and to be seen as a recognized other in a subculture.

In order to become a 'punk', culture members were to adhere to a strict ritualistic code of community-defined meaning, by practicing the values of which the movement was associated. Any variation from these tangents was seen as another culture, and the member could not be seen as a true and full participant in the 'punk' culture. As said by Clark:

Punk promised to build a *scene* which could not be taken. Its anger, pleasures, and ugliness were to go beyond what capitalism and bourgeois society could swallow. It would be untouchable, undesirable, unmanageable (Clark, 2003, p. 224).

Once in the group, the members had to do what they could to protect the culture and keep it their own, not allowing it to be exploited for the gain of outsiders. Thus, through my research, I have concluded that there are five significant and distinct states in which a punk exists and must continue to uphold in order to maintain membership in the subculture: the realization of rejection from mainstream society, rebellion against said society, desire to be part of an out-group, acceptance into the new group and responsibility as a group and individual to their society through political ambitions.

Realization of rejection from mainstream society

The participant must recognize that they are indeed different from the norm, either in chosen or unchosen ways including lifestyle, fashion, and social association. This comes into play as "a group of the alienated recognize what is happening to themselves. This realization can be based on active rejection either of or by mainstream society. These groups can either reject the alienation they see before them or can be unwillingly alienated from the mainstream" (O'Hara, 1999, p. 22-23). This is most certainly a part of punk, especially as it appeared in its purest form when the movement was exploding in Britain, where punk was "a transatlantic insurrection, changing the way young people dressed, the way they behaved and the way they were perceived by their peers" (Sabin, 1999, p. 69). Once recognizing that society has rejected them, they are free to become part of a culture without fear of societal repercussions.

Rebellion

Once the individual realizes their difference, they must attempt to consciously go against mainstream society; rejection simply based on their already-attained status as an outsider is not enough. The individual must make the choice to be different and to act out that difference in social situations and relationships. Through the years of evolution among the subculture, this has proven to be the crux of what the punk identity is based on, since “rebellion is one of the few undeniable characteristics of punk. It is implicit in the meaning of punk and its music and lyrics (O’Hara, 1999, p. 23). For the individual who chooses to participate, it is usually status that is not hard to attain, as the individual is already recognized as different from society and thus has some hostility toward the mainstream. Punk is usually “prompted by some form of rebellion, be it against parents, authorities or the whole system itself” (Beaumont, letter in *Maximum Rock N Roll* #53, Oct., 1987). This difference can also be realized by those who are simply interested in being different due to boredom or a lack of interest in mainstream culture, and are at once rejected upon accepting those beliefs. No matter which path the individual chooses to take, the rebellious element must remain constant and are carried through in all participants of the culture, as “the members of an alternative scene are all interested in being rebellious” (Tsitsos, 1999, p. 398).

Desire to be part of an ‘out-group’

As the members have now been rejected and rebelled by the greater society, they must now desire to remain part of a group, rather than maintaining an individual existence; separate from any group at all, the individual is autonomous and thus does not have any cultural ground on which to base their personal footing.

Some out-groups greatly desire to be a part of the mainstream while others do not ...

Members of subcultures, regardless of how oppressed, have often succeeded in finding solidarity and understanding amongst themselves that is lacking in mainstream society.

(O’Hara, 1999, p. 23).

For these individuals, success comes from finding out what part of society they wish to belong to, instead of becoming part of the normal society without free choice. It becomes easy for them to desire an association with a group based around anger at what’s going around them, and a desire to see a different look, often based around “calculated anger. It was anger at the establishment and anger at the allegedly soft rebellion of the hippie counterculture; anger too, at

the commodification of rock and roll” (Cullen, 1996, p. 249). Their understanding came from anger with the normal scene and a desire to be part of something that could be individual and unique; simultaneously seeking acceptance from their new culture while seeking rejection from those who they wished to offend. Once this choice is made, the individual is free to pursue different punk groups with ranging interest, finding a group of rejected souls with a similar heart in order to maintain an identity of outsider that’s still inside a subculture.

Acceptance into the new group

This is seen as a crucial stage for the individual, as they must correctly constitute the values of the subculture they wish to become a part of; if they fail to do this, they can be similarly rejected from this culture, leaving them in the middle ground of not being a part of either the popular culture or the counterculture. However, when performed successfully, this is arguably the most fulfilling portion of constituting punk identity; in realizing and accepting their new role in society, “members seem to regain a sense of themselves and each other that had previously been lost, forgotten or stolen” (O’Hara, 1999, p. 23). This is to say that becoming a part of the new culture is validation to both the new member and the other cultural members, in recognizing that both are in correct practice of cultural norms and thus have earned their spot in the counterculture; they validate their identity together by coming together in a singular community. For scholars, this acceptance from those who were similarly discarded is seen as an essential part of obtaining the identity of punk. Acceptance of the subcultural self from those signified others has existed since punk’s conception, “long after the ‘death’ of classical punk, post-punk and or/punk, subcultures coalesce around praxis. For contemporary punks, subcultural membership, authenticity and prestige are transacted through action internal to the subculture” (Clark, 2003, p. 230). Members are accepted once they demonstrate the previous values, and in standing together with their new culture. By validating their identities, old or new, the member’s own authenticity, as well as the culture’s authenticity, are simultaneously legitimized.

Responsibility as a group and individual to their society through political ambitions

Once their identity is complete, based on the acceptance of the overall group and in the context of the entire culture’s practice, a punk has a responsibility to its own culture and to the broader society:

Punks have found that the ultimate authenticity lies in political action. Where subcultures were once a steady source of freshly marketable styles for corporations, they now present corporations with a formidable opponent. Punk marks a terrain in which people steadfastly challenge urban sprawl, war, vivisection, deforestation, racism, the exploitation of the third world, and many other manifestations of corporate-capitalism. The threatening pose has been replaced with the actual threat (Clark, 2003, p. 231).

The culture, no longer content to simply appear dangerous, now carries itself as an agent of change in the world. Whether to enlighten or enrage, the true punk will be seen as an individual who cares about the movements larger than him or herself, who seeks to right societal wrongs and who bears the cross for all others who are oppressed, exploited and powerless in their societal roles. Punks “must now be ready for their role as cross-cultural carriers of another way of thinking, exhibiting the positive characteristics of the subculture: “to use our mind, to treat people with respect, not to judge on outward appearances, to support others in their struggle...” (O’Hara, 1999, p. 39). Once their identity as a “punk” becomes who they are, a punk has a larger responsibility to both its own counterculture and to the mainstream to be different from the norm, educating others on the true definitions of its culture and what kind of person should attempt to be a part of it. What makes punk different from other subcultures that share these same characteristics is a political ambition. Punk’s identity in the 1970’s came from bands and angry young people attempting to change what they felt was wrong in their culture. As a subculture, punk “thrust itself into politics and politics came back to claim it, whether resolving into the far right (Nazi skinheads), the left (Rock against Racism), anarchy (Crass), or a wider form of autonomy which stressed cultural and social independence” (Savage, 2002, p. XV).

Individuals who participate regularly in mainstream culture and attempt to infiltrate the punk subculture are often led there by the musical genre of punk rock. This musical and political connection distinguishes the punk subculture from other subcultures like Goths, skaters and ravers. Punk rock is most commonly associated with the term “punk” today, yet the meanings are not interchangeable. Much of the subcultural controversy between what is authentic stems from people associating a love of “punk rock” with being “punk,” when in fact specific subcultural values must be present for a member of the culture to be considered a “punk,” as the very word “throws up a whole series of problems in relation to even a basic definition of what it actually is. For some writers it is more properly punk rock, a music-based and music-centered phenomenon”

(Sabin, 1999, p. 81). For others, such as Hebdige, it is a subculture based on style, not musical tastes, which is where much of the argument lies in what creates the “authentic culture” on Absolutepunk.net. As a counterculture, the “transformations ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 18) allow members to practice different cultural values on style and political reach, separate from mainstream ideologies. This confusion leads to the need of research to determine cultural authenticity in both popular culture and subcultures. My project attempts to examine the differences, if any, that show up in the ideology and core values of the authentic punk and how the inauthentic punk differs. This will allow me to determine if the online message board members are punks in the defined sense, or something else entirely. Confusion also comes into play in the online world, where members cannot always determine authenticity as easily, as a large point of authenticity definition among the culture comes from personal interactions. The best way to do this involves a rhetorical critique of the artifact, specifically focusing on ideological criticism and the rhetoric found inside the subcultures in real life and in electronic life. This is a rhetorical problem and not sociological, as rhetoric determines the cultural practices by which a culture is created. Ideological criticism is also appropriate because it is based around the idea that groups have shared attitudes, beliefs and values that determine its cultural existence, and allow the cultures in question to negotiate meaning and identity based on rhetoric.

Background/rhetorical situation

In preparing for a rhetorical critique of the artifact, I observed discussions in forums and capital constituted in user profiles and posts among AbsolutePunk.net members for three hours a day, every day for four weeks, searching for similarities and differences between members in their personal information.

Ideological criticism is the most appropriate approach to this problem, with an ideology serving as “a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world” (Foss, 2004, p. 239). Ideological criticism is appropriate because whether the punk identity is authentic or not, each group has its own ideology based on a pattern of beliefs that comprise the way it views society and vice versa. It is also appropriate for the documented identity found online among AbsolutePunk.net members, as “ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior” (McGee, 1980, p. 5). AbsolutePunk.net is itself a large rhetorical document with instances of subcultural capital present, particularly among the members in their forum discussions and in profiles. These meanings are constituted to represent their persona online, and in turn, their identity toward the other subculture members:

Ideology has little to do with ‘consciousness’...it is profoundly unconscious...Ideology is indeed a system of representation, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with ‘consciousness’; they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their ‘consciousness’. They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them (Althusser, 1969).

In this way, ideology is viewed as an unconscious structure we place ourselves in due to an association with the culture, or a disassociation with other cultures, which is the basis for the existence of a counterculture. The ideology then envelopes the individual; it becomes “who we are, what we stand for, what our values are, and what our relationships are with other groups” _particularly groups that oppose what we stand for, threaten our interests, and prevent us from accessing resources important to us (Foss, 2004, p. 239).

Ideological criticism is also appropriate, as it is based primarily around the nature of undertaking an ideological viewpoint and defending it against the opposition, whether that is the dominant or non-dominant ideology:

Of course, it is impossible to write ideologically neutral criticism. Such attempts are often read as support for the status quo or public relations for established political and social practices [...] for better or worse, the logical conclusion of the ideological turn is a move to political or social activism. First, once a critic exposes the covert or overt ideological underpinnings of a movement, a speaker or policy, he or she has already entered the world of the activist (Anderson, 1993, p. 248).

This is important because historical and rhetorical context of punk (according to previously cited definitions), both to its own culture and the larger mainstream culture, represents a move into both political and social activism bent on providing change in the mainstream culture, either by recognizing those who have been rejected or by showing those in the mainstream culture what political and social practices represent the ideology of punk. Ideological criticism is also appropriate for the punk subculture, as ideologies are based on beliefs instead of consumption. A punk's ideology is a commodity that is achieved through work and cannot be bought. There is no social structure or price tag on becoming an authentic punk; it is all grunt work, and no glitter:

...the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided in classes or orders is dependent on what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged (Cloud, 1994, p. 144).

This characteristic is especially important for punks, as their existence as a subculture is contingent on the idea that another group opposes what they stand for and cannot easily attain the same identity and cultural status. In the beginning, this caused mainstream opposition, since "punk was earned and not something picked up in a convenience store as some might think today. In fact, punk was the opposite of convenient as it required effort to create and maintain any kind of sparse activity" (O'Hara, 1999, p. 8). Whereas today's 'punk-rock' is more accessible, even in its purest form, the first legitimate punks went out of their way to ensure that was not the case: "...avoided is any association with the prettiness of the mainstream song, in its forms as well as its contents...punk has few love songs" (Laing, 1985, p. 449).

In addition to musical preference, the punk's ideological stance on personal issues could stem from appearance. Two of the most common associations with group image are through his or her "appearance and noticeable attitudes towards other people. An individual's appearance includes their clothing and cosmetics" (Wilson & MacGillivray, 1998). This is important due to

inauthentic members posing as legitimate members of a subculture; it is especially important when clothing and cosmetics create an appearance in a profile on a message board that can be used to judge the authenticity of a subculture member. It is in this way that a punk undergoes the construction of image as different from dominant culture and the importance of this for the punk community:

From a perspective that values freedom, complexity and open-endedness, the most debilitating quality of a Marxist criticism involves its instrumental view of culture. Such a view can be more readily according to culture when it is conceived as the form and pattern of everyday life, as a lived relation to the conditions of existence, or as those 'webs of significance' by which we assign meaning to things within a historical field (Nichols, 2005, p. 23).

Besides appearance, there are other factors that must be examined when creating distinction of authentic versus inauthentic culture members. Absolutepunk.net is home to both communities of 'practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 94), which would be seen as the authentic culture that has existed and is the group for which the definition of "punk" is based on. The website is an extension of the legitimate culture, as those who believe it to be a community of practice "physically manifest their emerging political ideals" (Juris, 2005, p. 189) online among a community sharing a similar viewpoint or going through the same transformation of identity. This is crucial, as this manifestation of political ideals serves as the final piece in the punk identity puzzle; without a vested interest in social change or political issues affecting the world, an individual cannot truly be considered a 'punk.' It is also home to the communities of 'interest' (Uimonen, 2004, p. 274) which is generally thought to be inauthentic as not all the members adhere to the tenants of being a true participant in the punk subculture. Human beings are fluid individuals however, and a person's affective identity, according to Grossberg (1992), leaves them a multiple, taking on the shape and color of the effective state through which they move, leaving them with choices on which groups to associate themselves with. This occurs as much among the inauthentic members as the authentic members, as the inauthentic punks are still separate from the mainstream and from the punk culture itself, but are making the conscious choice to be different and move throughout the other cultures in which they exist. For an authentic punk, their identity is still fluid, but it is completely steeped in the idea of displaying an image contrary to the norm and showcasing personal and political beliefs in order to create

change in a society that doesn't understand them. Inauthentic punks do not have that problem, as they view themselves as separate members of the mainstream based on image and personal beliefs, but not larger beliefs affecting individuals outside of themselves or in a political context.

This brings my discussion to the importance of the Internet, and its role in this subcultural practice of communication and building proof of identity. For AbsolutePunk.net, the members are drawn together based on the community of punk and the idea of a subculture over a medium that allows for continuous discussion and sharing of ideas. This, when combined with “interactivity, multimedia and global connectivity,” helps create “the most powerful juggernaut in the history of technology” (Robins & Webster, 1999, p. 66) and allows for multiple user discussion, interaction and identity validation among previously proven members of the subculture. This is not to say that it is only useful for those who already have a legitimized stance in the community, as AbsolutePunk.net serves the needs of authentic and inauthentic members equally:

Online communities are most certainly useful in providing a head start on those who wish to gain knowledge of the culture, as they exhibit a wide range of characteristics and serve a variety of purposes, from small groups engaged in tightly focused discussions of specific topics, to complex created worlds with hundreds of simultaneous participants, to millions of users linked by an interest in markets or exchange networks for goods and information (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 44).

This creates confusion because those who wish to gain a knowledge of the culture are not always gaining the correct knowledge from vested members of the subculture. While open to the public and non-biased in their view of the world, membership on websites like AbsolutePunk.net requires no dress code, no statement of beliefs – only a screen name and a password. These websites are “open to the entire world that writes in the language used and regularly uses computer-based communication resources” (Peterson & Bennett, 2004, 192). This allows the community of “interest” to blend in seamlessly with those who live in the community of “practice,” and thus creates confusion among members looking for advice on their own punk identity, in either case. Due to the complexities of proving authenticity in this online culture, as personal interaction is limited to the computer screen only, the Internet needs to be explored academically. Through ideological criticism, I will explore the ideas found in both cultures and how both groups negotiate meaning and possible acceptance into the subculture through their

five key elements of achieving authentic punk identity, and where the distinctions lie in analyzing the differences among those who truly belong to the subculture and those inauthentic others who are lacking in one way or another.

Discussion and findings

Through observation on AbsolutePunk.net, the researcher concluded that there are three distinct areas where members can create, proclaim and maintain authentic punk identity, or display their inauthenticity as an outsider of the punk subculture. These three areas were through the individual's screen name and avatar, their personal forum profile, and through rhetorical discussion in the forum message boards.

For members of AbsolutePunk.net, building their identity starts from their first entrance into the site by selecting a screen name. Any member of AbsolutePunk.net must have a screen name; a name that is displayed when they are online and represents their profile. The researcher found much variance in the way members portrayed themselves through their username and the meanings that were construed based on the displayed names. Some names were simply the person's real-life name, such as "BenEvans" or "Jason_Tate", but most users chose to make their names more ambiguous or elaborate. Since these names are chosen by the user and not randomly assigned, it gives the user an opportunity to create their own identity. An example of an authentic punk screen name is "ChickVicious." This member displays authenticity through knowledge of historical punk figures and important people in the punk rock movement, by alluding to legendary punk bassist Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols through an avatar of the band. Screen names are also accompanied by avatars, which are photos that represent the user online in the forums and are displayed next to all posts the user makes. By aligning herself with the Sex Pistols, the user "ChickVicious" is implying that she has some knowledge of authentic punk. The member with the username "JoeStrummer," accompanied by an avatar of a photo of the great Clash guitarist, demonstrates knowledge of the subculture and the importance of its history. Inauthenticity is displayed repeatedly by members attempting to use inappropriate figures who they believe are part of the "punk" subculture in their avatars and screen names. For example, the user name "FallOutGirl" is a play on the popular band Fall Out Boy, who is classified as a "punk band" by the mainstream, but are not members of the punk subculture as defined by the rules of authenticity, or classified as 'punk' by the users of AbsolutePunk.net. This user is critiqued for her association with an "outsider" of the subculture, as one authentic user said in reply to her posts, "you might make a good argument, but it's hard to take you seriously with a name like that." Here, this authentic member has constituted what makes a name inauthentic, and represented his views for the culture online for all to see. More inauthenticity is displayed in the

thread “Lame People,” when the user “pnkbasschic” complains that “[she’s] so sick of tenny [sic] boppers! Whats this world coming to? We should do away with all teeny boppers they really can put you in a bad mood!” Member “AtTheDriveIn,” who quotes her post and replies, calls her arguments and authenticity as a punk into question; “you know youre [sic] a teeny bopper when you use the words “punk” and “chick” in your username.” Here, “AtTheDriveIn” has constituted the user “pnkbasschic” as an inauthentic member based on her screen name representation, and associated her with a social trend outside of the subculture by critiquing one of the ways in which she has built her online image, which destroys her credibility as an authentic member of the punk subculture. This is further coupled when member “NOFXdesendents5” quotes both previous posts and replies, “yup. or sk8er boi. or (band/member name)’s girl... [And] you know you are an idiot when you forget to put the “C” in DESCENDENTS, like me.” This member has not only constituted what makes a member’s name authentic by agreeing with another authentic user on what has made “pnkbasschic” an inauthentic subcultural member, and he’s also proven that he realizes his name also doesn’t fit the context of a ‘punk’ screen-name. However, he’s used his post as an opportunity to correct his mistake in front of other authentic members of the subculture, while still criticizing an inauthentic member on her incorrect cultural practices and subsequent absence from the authentic subculture. Through this, the user has demonstrated that he has a vested interest in the culture and the correct practices, which gives him the rhetorical ground to critique an inauthentic user on her mistakes.

Screen names are only one part of the authenticity equation. By clicking on a screen name, users are taken to that person’s individual profile. Profiles contain all kinds of information about the user from their sex and age to their personal interests. It is here where members can display cultural capital, which is anything that confers authentic status in the subculture according to Thornton. Authentic members of the subculture view their profile as a way to communicate their authenticity in multiple ways. One user, “xwhatispunkx,” demonstrates her authenticity by posting a photo of herself in punk wardrobe, citing important punk literature in her favorite books such as *Subculture-the meaning of style* and *The Hipster Handbook*, and by linking herself to appropriate websites, such as MoveOn.org and PunkVoter.com, both politically motivated websites and part of the accepted authentic punk subculture. She also demonstrates her political views as “liberal” in the political preference column, showing again that she has a

vested interest in social change and has an ideological stance on which she lives her life, one that is most commonly accepted as the culture has evolved.

Inauthentic members of the subculture will use their profile to display values that are outside of the subculture. One user, “sk8er_boi666,” already has an inauthentic screen name as previously defined by user “NOFXDesendents5.” In addition to his screen name, he appears in a normal looking shirt and khakis in his profile photo, which is not correct punk dress. In his favorite musicians, he lists Avril Lavigne and H.I.M. repeatedly, which are artists that would never be associated with the punk subculture. Despite the stating in his biography “i’m punk/goth/emo i guess,” the user also states that “[he is] mostly influenced by bam margera,” who is a figure that is outside the subculture. By choosing to align his influences with this “outsider” of the subculture, this user is demonstrating that he has no idea of what the subculture is comprised of; as stated before, historical interest and knowledge of the subculture is important to creating authenticity. Most crucially, this user demonstrates states that he has “no preference” on political views in the political preference column, indicating that he has no interest in any type of social change or movement to help rejected others, which is a cornerstone in the punk subculture. In this case, this user’s online identity is being incorrectly constructed, and the images and texts he refers to himself with for his online representation do not suggest that he is an authentic punk.

Another user, “outsider_gurl”, appears in a pastel-colored dress in a “senior-picture style portrait” for her profile photo, which is not correct punk dress. She also chooses to list Michelle Branch and Vanessa Carlton among her favorite musicians, which are artists that would never be associated with the punk subculture. Most crucially, this user demonstrates states that her political views are “apathetic” in the political preference column, indicating that she has no interest in any type of social change or movement to help rejected others, which is a cornerstone in the punk subculture. In this case, this user’s online identity is being incorrectly constructed, and the images and texts she refers to herself with for her online representation do not suggest that she is an authentic punk, despite repeated emphasis in her profile that “[she’s] very misunderstood @ school and fit in nowhere.” While she might be seen as an outsider in mainstream society, her lack of involvement in politics leaves her outside of the authentic punk subculture as well.

As important as individual appearances are to demonstrating authenticity in the punk subculture, it is only through group acceptance that a user can become a member of the subculture. It is in this way that the forum discussions are an extremely vital aspect in determining cultural authenticity, as they serve as a means for users to demonstrate their knowledge in the subculture and authentic members can lend acceptance. Authentic users will often create discussion relating to political or punk issues. Current popular discussions stem from topics such as 2008 presidential candidates, the genocide in Darfur/Sudan or ethical debates involving religion, racism or gay marriage, all of which are part of the authentic subculture. While right-wing punk bands exist, they are often fronts of and for other subcultures built on hatred of the other, race and class superiority or, in the most extreme cases, abject disdain and glorification of violence against the most vulnerable members of society - all of which would be at odds with an authentic punk experience, despite appearances seeming similar to an outsider.

Many discussions also revolve around music of the punk subculture, which is where much of the disagreement takes place over authenticity. In these discussions, users will talk about punk values and how they relate to the culture. An example can be found in the thread “Can Anyone Help Me Out Here?,” which involves “BenEvans,” an outside member attempting to find meaning between punks and punk rock. When the poster “EMOisXmyOXYGEN” posts a reply that is thought to be incorrect, member “asthesoulman” quotes the post, then posts “I laughed” below, with another user quoting it and replying with “...seriously?” demeaning the image and thoughts of the previous user. However, when user “cfear,” a longstanding member with a high post count writes an appropriate response, the member who previously disregarded “EMOisXmyOXYGEN”’s answer quotes “cfear”’s response, then posts a moving picture of a standing ovation with the overlaid text “Very good answers, sir.” It is in this way that not only inappropriate actions and subcultural practices are recognized as incorrect, but the community itself serves as a means of validating one another’s identity as discussed by O’Hara earlier.

In the discussion, “What is Punk?,” users are asked their opinions and personal values on what they consider punk. Authentic users will cite the values of the subculture, such as user “BanMe”’s reply that “punk means being different in an indefinable way. It’s about creating change for those who don’t have a voice.” This is an appropriate response, which other authentic users recognize by quoting them in their replies along with congratulatory words like “well said,” “hell yes!” or “I couldn’t agree more.” Inauthenticity is then demonstrated by users who

don't understand the subculture, like the user "WastedN'Wounded" in a discussion on real punk music. When he attempts to critique the subculture for not recognizing mainstream bands like Good Charlotte as punk, the user "xwisebuddhax" replies to the message with an emoticon displaying the image of someone laughing. This is his way of stating that user "WastedN'Wounded"'s response was inappropriate and recognized as an incorrect answer and means of authenticity demonstration. User "MelissaJohnson" is more helpful in correcting him, saying "bands like Good Charlotte are bound to be more popular, when if you look at the majority of the people who actually participate in the website's discussions, you'll see that they're pretty much ripped into by users." This is her way of saying that the users on AbsolutePunk.net determine authenticity, and they have historically demonstrated that a band like Good Charlotte does not carry and uphold the true attitudes, beliefs and values of the subculture and should not be associated with it. It also demonstrates "WastedN'Wounded" as an inauthentic member of the subculture. However, through Melissa's correction, this user can learn from it and change his ways in order to truly become an authentic member of the subculture if he chooses to do this.

Overall, all the members of AbsolutePunk.net share some of the same subcultural characteristics that define the punk culture. Members of both the authentic and inauthentic cultures are recognized as "others" in society and see a difference between themselves and the rest of the world. The members of both cultures are rebelling against societal norms and accepted social roles, in many cases to extremes in terms of appearance and societal beliefs. Finally, the members of both cultures desire to be part of an out-group held together by a common bond. The differences come from where the bond lies and in which culture they are a part of. Based on the defining characteristics of the punk subculture, many members of AbsolutePunk.net are not true participants in the subculture by not completing all five steps to achieving authentic identity. Many do not hold the same vested interest in politics and social movements that authentic punks do; instead, all effort to portray identity is vested in "punk rock" music only, which is a different culture altogether. Although the "punk rock" music culture is still a culture apart from the mainstream, it is not as vested in practice as the 'punk' culture, and the two do not carry the same meaning, though inauthentic others will use both terms interchangeably and incorrectly. Based on these differences, these inauthentic users are still outside of the mainstream, but not part of the authentic punk subculture.

Conclusion

The users of AbsolutePunk.net conform to some of the original ideals of the punk subculture, with some users portraying authenticity in every state and some users only obtaining a few states of difference, which is not enough to be considered an authentic member of the subculture. The major differences are found in the confusion between those who are participants in the “punk rock” music counterculture and those are also participants in the “punk” subculture, relating specifically to lifestyle choices and political ambitions outside of the culture, lead to a difference between the two authentic cultures. Thusly, there are members on AbsolutePunk.net who are punks and members who are part of the “punk rock” movement, but these are not always one and the same. This conclusion was obtained after careful analysis of member profiles and forum posts and comparison with a wide body of academic literature on the history, context, rhetorical values and defining practices of the punk subculture. A good future study would explore the punk culture between members of legitimate “real-life” punk subcultures who also use websites to see if they portray their identity differently online than they do in their everyday life. While punk is still an evolving subculture, its core values based on alienation, rejection, community and dedication to social issues have been and will continue to be its defining characteristics. Though mainstream society will attempt to label anyone it sees differently as punk, the subculture will be there to embrace them or correct them, depending on that person’s values. Users on AbsolutePunk.net demonstrate this daily in their lives through their image portrayal and associations with the defined values of the authentic subculture and its body of research. Punks may never be understood or accepted by mainstream society, but it is only through education that they will be recognized by who they are and, perhaps just as importantly, who they are not.

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Works Consulted

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