

»OLD PUNKS NEVER DIE. THEY JUST STAND AT THE BACK«. CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO BRITISH PUNK SUBCULTURE

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Introduction

There is a tendency to define punk simply in terms of its music and to portray ageing punks as »followers« or »fans« of »punk rock« (Bennett 2006). However, although punk music forms a focal point for punk subculture, it is not the subculture in its entirety; hence, I see the subculture that is built around punk music as being »music-based«. From its conception the Do-it-Yourself (DIY) ethos was visible at every level in punk, from fanzines and clothing to bands and music production. As punk gained popularity and entered the mainstream this ethos was seen to be compromised, and is largely seen as irrelevant to the current punk subculture.¹ In reality, this ethos persisted and formed the foundation of a subculture that continues to this day. While the ability to attract younger newcomers is of utmost importance to the longevity of »underground« punk subculture, it also relies heavily on retaining more established participants, some of whom have continued their involvement since the late seventies.

By drawing on interviews, observations, and survey data collected between 2004 and 2005 (by which time punk subculture had persisted in Britain for almost thirty years), this paper asks why individuals aged thirty and above remain committed to the subculture. It explores what impact other commitments, such as parental responsibility and employment, might have on involvement and how they manage their subcultural participation alongside these other commitments. The paper also considers in what ways age enhances the status of subcultural participants. By highlighting the lived

1 Exceptions include Gosling (2004), and O'Hara (1995).

experiences of such participants it is hoped that this paper will show the more meaningful dimension of the subculture and in doing so, will help towards an understanding of why individuals remain committed.

The next section examines why older individuals are often overlooked as subcultural participants. It then moves on to discuss my findings which explore why older individuals remain committed to this subculture.

Youth and Subculture: ›A New Language of Ageing‹

Essentially the reason why adults are routinely overlooked as subcultural participants is because the concept of subculture is historically associated with youth. One clear endorsement of this association is the customary usage of ›youth‹ that prefixes subculture. Further, post-war Britain saw the young person being more clearly differentiated by the introduction of the term ›teenager‹, and the divide between young people and adults was marked by the notion of the ›generation gap‹. In traditional terms, then, subcultures are portrayed as spaces distinct from the adult world, where young people can experiment with music and appearance; hence, Mike Brake's idea of subcultural involvement being a ›brief encounter‹ and a ›respite between school and the insecurities of the early days of first working, and settling down into marriage and adulthood‹ (Brake 1980: 23). It is on this basis that music-based subcultures are typically looked on as youthful fads based on consumption, inevitably to be abandoned with the onset of adulthood.

The problem of aligning popular music with purely young people was recognised almost two decades ago by Steve Redhead (1990: 8) who argued that popular music was ›no longer simply ›youth‹ music‹ and that categories such as ›teenager, generation gap, youth culture, and youth subculture‹ were heading for ›imminent destruction‹.² Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth (1991: 383) also saw such ›imminent destruction‹ of traditional age categories, which is why they called for ›a new language of ageing‹. They draw attention to Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) earlier concept of the ›uni age‹, which argues that the behaviour, self-presentation and lei-

2 In contrast to contemporary theorists who replace the term ›subculture‹ with ›scene‹ (cf. Bennett/Peterson 2004), I choose to refer to such groupings as music-based subcultures. On this, I tend to agree with Hodkinson (2002) who argues that the concept of subculture should be re-worked rather than replaced.

sure activities of adults are coming more into line with those of young people. Specific to popular music, Stephen Miles (1998: 115) highlights how demographic changes have led to »an expanding market of middle-aged music buyers«. Thus, a portion of the adult population has replaced youth as key consumers of popular music. This situation has led many to believe nostalgia is central to adults engaging with popular music. For example, Andy Bennett (2001: 153) argues that »the increasing dominance of the retro market in contemporary popular culture is enabling respective post-war generations effectively to relive their youth«. A similar view is expressed by Karen Brooks (2003), who turns to Jacques Peretti's (1998) argument that in consuming the image of »youth«, »adolescents« are artificially recapturing a state of youthfulness. In referring to this process as »cultural necrophilia« (Peretti, cited in Brooks 2003: 4), Peretti highlights nostalgia as central to an understanding of adult preoccupation with youth.

In relation to the above views, whilst I appreciate nostalgia might be important in why adults continue to be attracted to a certain musical genre, I am not convinced that this alone accounts for continued commitment to the subculture built around that music. Related to this, whilst I welcome the growing acceptance with which adults engage with popular music, I take issue with them being portrayed as simply consumers and not subcultural participants. On this point, relatively recent work by Bennett (2006: 226) is useful for recognising that ageing individuals remain committed to »punk rock« because they see punk as »a set of beliefs and practices«. Unfortunately, by concentrating on the musical aspect of punk (illustrated by the sub-title of his article: »The Continuing Significance of *Punk Rock* for an Older Generation of *Fans*« [my emphasis]), Bennett does not fully explore how the values and beliefs attached to this music impact on the daily lives of those involved in its subculture.

Before addressing these gaps with reference to my own research, the paper will outline the methodology.

Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper are taken from a wider research project that involved survey responses from 205 individuals, and semi-structured interviews with 46 current and five ex-participants involved with British underground punk. The survey was distributed nationally in four ways: at gigs, by post, by email, and webpage. However, most of those distributed in person were limited to the north-west, north-east, and the midlands. Conveni-

ence and snowballing sampling methods were used for both the survey and interviews. Twenty survey respondents took part in follow-up interviews. I attempted to select individuals who varied in their stage of involvement in punk. The sample ranged in age from 14 to 50 and mostly comprised white males.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, via email and, in one instance, by post. The former took place at gigs, in public houses and (in some circumstances) in the homes of those interviewed. They were recorded using a Dictaphone and were later transcribed. To protect the identity of those who took part in the research, each participant was assigned a code and, in some cases, a pseudonym.

Why Individuals Remain Involved in British Underground Punk Subculture

Those individuals this paper is concerned with were aged thirty to fifty-years-old and had been involved with the subculture for an average of twenty-two years.³ These findings alone indicate that involvement with a subculture can continue well beyond adolescence and thus challenges the idea of involvement as temporary and superficial. On the contrary, established participants tended to regard the subculture in lasting terms, describing it as a »way of life« and a »lifestyle«. The importance of the subculture was emphasised by a male participant with twenty-two years involvement: »Punk is not just image or music, it is also an attitude and a way of life« (P32r125, age 38). It was discovered that punk became a way of life through a gradual process, whereby its music, style, values and beliefs were not only adopted, but became part of the everyday lives of its participants. For many of its participants, then, punk is not simply a form of music or style of dress: it is these things and more. This explains why reasons for remaining involved with the subculture were usually found to be multiple and interrelated. By turning to these components, then, I will suggest in what ways they motivate older individuals to persist with their involvement. First, I will turn to music.

3 Findings show that such respondents had been involved with the subculture from six to twenty-eight years. Only two had been involved for less than twelve years: one for six and the other eight years. This finding, therefore, suggests that it was unusual for those aged thirty and above to have been involved for less than twelve years.

Music

It might be seen as stating the obvious to say that some participants believe that the music is the essence of punk; but what precisely is it about the music that sustains participants' interest? My research would suggest that there are three key factors: first, the particular style of the music and, linked to this, its diversity. Second, there are the underlying DIY principles which inform the way underground punk music is accessed, performed, produced and consumed. Lastly the evidence indicates that nostalgia and familiarity play a role in maintaining an interest in punk music. Each of these motivating factors is considered below.

Musical Style and Diversity

As expected, some participants continue their commitment with the subculture because they »love the music« (R95), finding it »exciting and full of energy« (R160). Additionally, some said they like the variation that punk music offers (for example old-school, anarcho, hardcore, and ska punk), which perhaps indicates that its diversity prevents punk music becoming repetitive or boring. (This said, some individuals expressed their preference for just one style of punk music). Despite the diversity, punk music was seen as unified in its energy by using simple (i.e. three-chord based) songs played at a fast tempo. Most punk music also has an unrefined or »raw« sound, often enhanced by distorted guitar. The vocal style of punk is typically angry, though, like the tempo and distortion, the intensity depends on the particular style; for example, hardcore is played extremely fast, has a heavy metal influenced guitar sound and screamed vocals, which suggests a high level of anger and energy. The former quality can be linked to the subculture's values and beliefs (see below) as expressed in the lyrics. »Energy« is obviously connected with this, giving the anger a passionate edge, which is especially evident at a live performance, where music might also provide a release for both audience member and, as we shall see below, the performer. This was illustrated by a thirty-one-year-old female who depicted »that feeling of seeing a live [hardcore punk] band, who play the kind of music I like with the raw passion and energy« as »a total catharsis« (P16).

While participants clearly felt that recorded music had its place in punk subculture, live music was fundamental. In my survey, frequenting gigs was found to be the most popular subcultural activity amongst all those aged

thirty and above. One reason for this is that entry is inexpensive (sometimes non-existent), thus making punk an especially accessible form of music. In addition to seeing bands perform, live music events were also considered important places for buying and selling recorded music and related merchandise (such as band T-shirts, badges and patches), and for obtaining and distributing political information. Buying merchandise from underground distributors was the second most popular subcultural activity amongst older survey respondents; three-quarters (78 per cent) of those aged thirty and above said they were involved in it. While this finding indicates that consumption is important to older individuals, another finding shows that only one-quarter (21 per cent) of these individuals were involved in purely consumer-related subcultural activities.⁴

Being in a Band

As mentioned above, my research found accessibility important to punk's attraction. Bearing in mind the survey targeted individuals who actively participated in the subculture, it is not surprising that most survey respondents (64 per cent) aged thirty and above, were in a punk band. Of these, only two limited their involvement to playing in a band; in other words, hardly any remained uncommitted to the subculture beyond their role as a band member, and this was illustrated by their being involved with the subculture in other ways (by being involved I mean such things as organising and frequenting gigs, buying merchandise, or running a distribution).

For the great majority of older individuals, being in a punk band provided them with a sense of fulfillment on various levels. Having control over creativity (of which one aspect was the opportunity to promote specific political and ethical viewpoints) was found to be of utmost importance, as illustrated by Ade, a thirty-nine-year-old male participant:

»Any money made from [the band merchandise] goes back into the next band project, [...] we tend to do benefit gigs, money's never been a concern. [...] Putting a point across not being part of the mainstream and meeting like minded people is its own reward.«

Another way that being in a band was fulfilling was that it provided the opportunity to travel to other parts of the UK, and sometimes outside. This is illustrated further by a thirty-eight-year-old male participant, who explained that such experience provided him with an insight into »how different scenes are handled in different countries« (R108). Thus, that expe-

4 Consumer-related activities include frequenting gigs and buying merchandise.

periences are shared globally indicates the full extent of the punk community. In addition, band members tended to consider the subculture's social network (and the mutual aid this entailed) as imperative to sustaining its longevity.

DIY Music-making

The ways that DIY principles provide punk performers with a sense of autonomy has already been mentioned, but now I would specifically like to examine why this was found to be important in explaining why older individuals remained committed to the subculture. Participants frequently used the term »honest« to describe the musical aspect of the subculture; I therefore asked one individual what he meant by punk being honest. He replied, »since '76 the punk bands (well most of 'em) have echoed views/sentiments in songs that Joe Public has felt but not been able to express« (P9r147, male, age 36). He thus sees the music as expressing the everyday experiences and situations of the audience, strengthening the idea of equality between performers and audience. A further sense of how DIY principles are central to punk music retaining a level of autonomy is illustrated by the following comment: »We keep this scene going without any need for the music industry. This is *our* scene not money making people with no interest in us« (R43, male, age 38 [respondent's emphasis]).

Conveyed in this comment is the notion of human agency; in other words, that the subculture should be managed by its participants, which follows the popular punk slogan »punk belongs to the punx,⁵ not businessmen!« Behind this is the belief that those who are involved respect the subculture and are, therefore, less likely to exploit it. This explains why bands that have raised the profile of punk in the mainstream are castigated for »selling-out«.⁶

Nostalgia

Not all those involved in the subculture reject more commercial punk bands, though; some have followed certain bands since their youth and see no reason to stop. Added to this some participants frequented larger-scale,

5 This deliberate misspelling of the plural of punk is typically used by those involved in the subculture.

6 This is illustrated by one individual who, whilst recognising that former underground punk band Green Day had maintained a political edge, added: »even their rebellion is a product-like form, like Coca Cola« (P28, male, age 37).

more commercially orientated punk festivals such as Rebellion (formerly known as Holidays-in-the-Sun (H.I.T.S), and Wasted) and Feeding of the Five Thousand,⁷ where nostalgia is clearly at the fore.⁸

As survey responses tended to relate directly to the example of Wasted⁹ festivals (given in my questionnaire), particular attention has been paid to these. My investigation reveals that individuals typically saw these festivals as »great fun though not in the true spirit of punk« (R79, male, age 33). Participants considered such events as not »true« to punk because they are »too commercialised [...] nothing different to the music biz we're often so critical of« (R8, age 37). Another individual considered such festivals enjoyable, »if you don't take it too seriously« (R15, age 30). The view that Wasted is not to be taken seriously is shared by two other participants. The first said: »I appreciate them for what they are. It is a chance to see bands that don't get out much or missed the first time around« (R23, age 37); the second said: »Good social event if nothing else« (R165, age 30). The positive view, then, was that the festivals provided individuals with a fun weekend where they had an opportunity to see old punk bands again, or for the first time because they were too young or not even born.¹⁰ Despite clearly enjoying Wasted, participants typically saw the commercial element of such festivals and their focus on the past, as being distinct from contemporary underground punk subculture. Connected to this, findings indicate that while nostalgia helps to explain why individuals maintain an interest in punk music, there is no reason to suggest that it is sufficient reason to account for why individuals remain involved in underground punk subculture.

A Sense of Belonging: »Family« and »Friendships«

As stated above, the gig was the most popular activity engaged in by those who participated in the subculture. In this respect punk is not dissimilar to the goths, for whom, as Paul Hodkinson (2002: 85) notes, »there is little

7 This festival is held in London annually. It is less established than Rebellion, but is on a similar commercial scale. It hosts mainly past, and some present, anarcho punk bands.

8 In fact the first H.I.T.S festival, held in Blackpool in 1996, was called Nostalgia.

9 The main Wasted weekend event was held in the sea-side towns of Morecambe and Blackpool, in the North-West of England.

10 This opportunity was extended to overseas visitors who were considered as disadvantaged because UK punk bands would be likely to perform more UK dates than those overseas.

doubt that [...] the most important practical activities were going out to events and socializing with other members of the subculture«. On this level, then, the punk social gathering functions as a space where participants, who have a shared taste in music, can socialise and have fun. But, there is frequently a more meaningful dimension to such interaction through friendships and a sense of social cohesion, as these two participants attest:

»Most of my friends are in the punk scene and we all meet up at gigs, like a big *family*« (R96, male, age 39 [my emphasis]).

»It's where I feel most at *home* and where I feel I have things in common with those around me« (R15, male, age 30 [my emphasis]).

The way that the culture is described here, using domestic terms like »family« and »home«, warrants attention. First, feeling at home, and the sense of familiarity this might promote, was typically given by older individuals for their continued involvement with the subculture. In addition, they frequently used emotive terms such as »love« and »passion« to describe their feelings towards punk. A sense of pride and respect for the subculture was also expressed:

»I've been a punk for 25 years [...] I'm fucking proud to be a punk and I always will be (even if I'm too bald to grow spiky hair these days!)« (R43, male, age 38).

»I can't really leave it [punk] alone because it seems to trigger a chemical in my head that just makes me feel good. I meet some great people in the scene who are equally passionate and that will do for me. Also if I can contribute to keeping punk real and enthusiastic then I really believe I am achieving something« (P40, male, age 41).

This comment, by a gig organiser, indicates the importance of socialising with like-minded individuals. It also shows that a sense of achievement is gained through contributing to the subculture, and connected to the phrase »keeping punk real« points towards the DIY aspect of the culture.

The sense of camaraderie between participants was frequently conveyed by older individuals for whom the sense of »family« and »love« was also important. Thus, a thirty-seven-year-old male participant explained how he felt a »sense of belonging to a huge extended family where I am respected. I doubt I would find this in so-called ›normal‹ society« (R149). Participants tended to see themselves as different because of their appearance and values. One participant explained that this created a sense of »camaraderie« between participants, whom he described as »a collection of freaks« (P1r38). Another participant, likewise, described the subculture as »a safety net for the social misfit« (P40). This corresponds with Daniel

Wolf's observation that the bikers in his study needed a »collective consciousness to stabilize their convictions and to insulate themselves from the negative stereotypes and prejudices that come from the citizen or ›straight society« (Wolf 1991: 36).

Identity

Emphasised above is the importance that those involved in punk subculture place on being with like-minded individuals who not only share the same musical taste and appearance, but also basic values. Connected to a sense of belonging, then, is a notion of collective identity and solidarity; these are features which Michel Maffesoli (1996) recognises as vital to the emotional communities that form the basis of postmodern or ›neo-tribes«. Moreover, the importance that participants placed on certain values and beliefs fits with the idea that such communities are »often moral communities«, as Kevin Hetherington (1998: 63) puts it: »People want to belong, they want to have some way of showing their empathy with like-minded people; they want a form of solidarity based on shared ethical and aesthetic values«. The importance of shared values and beliefs will be stressed later, but here I will concentrate on the issue of identity.

My investigation shows that some individuals were eager to establish their identity as being entirely punk. To illustrate this, I will draw attention to two male participants who gave similar analogies to describe their identity. The first said, »If you cut me in half I'll have punk rock written round my belly. [...] like a stick of [sea-side] rock« (P1r38). The second said, »If you cut me I bleed safety pins« (R59). More generally, though, individuals recognised the multi-faceted nature of identity and saw punk as only one part. As, Kim, aged 31, a female with nineteen years' involvement explained:

»Punk is part of me but I am not hundred per cent punk because I'm so many other things; like I'm an artist and I listen to other types of music. And I've got a lot of links to other philosophy I'm into; paganism and stuff like that.«

Similarly, Andy, a 30+ male with twelve years involvement, commented:

»I'd say I like to think of myself as an, er, an activist punk really, not just punk. [...] I don't go to gigs to get pissed up. I go to gigs to meet people and find out about bands, political stuff, y'know anti-fascism, whatever.«

This comment indicates that individuals attached different meanings to punk. In this instance, Andy connects punk with political activism and sees

gigs as spaces where this aspect could be expressed. This is emphasised in the way that he clearly dissociates himself from those who he sees as purely interested in the enjoyable aspect of gigs, especially consuming alcohol. Not only does this emphasise the different meanings participants attach to punk, but also in how such meanings divide participants.

Interestingly, my research shows that whilst some individuals expressed a sense of pride in identifying themselves as punk, there was sometimes reluctance to admit to being a punk to outsiders. For example, Kim, mentioned above, explained how she would ›cringe‹ when admitting to curious work colleagues that she was a punk:

»If you say punk they think Sid Vicious. [...] They don't understand any of the music, [...] anything to do with the DIY scene or the politics. You say punk [...] and they go, ›Oh yeah, you spit at people then!‹«

As this example shows, the negative media stereotype influences how outsiders perceive punk.¹¹ This is not to say that the punk stereotype of being concerned about having a punk appearance, displaying drug and alcohol induced nihilistic behaviour does not exist, because it does.¹² However, as the above evidence shows, some participants clearly distanced themselves from this image.

Other Subcultural Affiliations

My research suggests that those who participate in punk tend to listen to other styles of music and often move into other subcultural environments, including skinhead, goth, metal, the free-party scene and techno; however, despite taking account of involvement with other subcultures those who identified themselves as punk saw themselves as such even when in another subcultural environment. Here, for example, is Ben, a forty-year-old who had participated in punk for twenty-seven years:

M: Do you identify yourself as a punk?

B: Yeah, completely.

M: Do you like other styles of music?

B: [...] I like indie and I like goth.

11 I should point out that punk music and its subculture are not necessarily viewed in this way by academics (cf. Gosling 2004).

12 As with many other music cultures, alcohol and drugs are common at punk social gatherings (getting ›wasted‹ is so commonplace in punk that the term is the title of the festivals mentioned above). However, whereas most individuals seem to exhibit a degree of control, some appear to deliberately express anti-social, violent behaviour because they consider this fits with the punk image.

M: If you go to, say a goth event. [...] Do you still identify yourself as a punk?

B: Yeah, I do, yeah.

M: Or do you change your identity to goth?

B: No. I'm a punk. I'm a punk.

So, while individuals might cross into the spaces of other subcultures this does not necessarily mean they develop a multiple subcultural identity as, for example, punk-goth. Ben's affiliation with goth was based purely on musical taste, whereas his affiliation with punk was seen as being much deeper.

Core Values and Beliefs

While the social and pleasurable aspects of punk are shown to be vital in explaining why many older individuals continue to be involved, this investigation suggests that punk's more meaningful aspects, its »ideals« (R9), »ethics« (R69) and »politics« (R139 and R193), are paramount. I have already illustrated the value that participants place on the DIY aspect of punk, but I should point out that the subculture's other core values and beliefs include an anti-establishment viewpoint, and a commitment to human equality, animal rights, and environmental concerns. I should also point out that such principles are not, of course, exclusive to punk, which is why some, such as George McKay (1996), regard punk as part of a long tradition of »cultures of resistance«. I begin this section, then, by asking about the ways in which the subculture's core values and beliefs motivate older individuals to remain committed to punk.

My findings suggest that older individuals believe the integrity of the subculture is maintained by their commitment to particular values and beliefs. Participants typically said they held certain views prior to getting involved in punk and being involved with the subculture had given them a deeper understanding: »I still hold the same fundamental beliefs I've had for many years and punk forms a major part of those beliefs« (R60, male, age 37). Thus, as was shown above, they felt at home in punk, because they were among like-minded others, like a family. In addition, some considered the subculture's value system as the necessary basis on which they could continue to challenge societal conventions.

Interviews showed that the subculture's values and beliefs also often influenced participants' general consumption and child-rearing practices. For example, Ade, the thirty-nine-year-old mentioned earlier, and his former punk partner would not buy their children footwear that had been manufac-

tured using child-labour. They had also taught their children to have compassion for animals and had raised them vegetarian. Indeed, it was common for vegetarian or vegan participants to raise their children to have the same convictions. The seriousness with which some took their values and beliefs amplifies the earlier comment about punk being more a way of life than »just image or music« (P32r125).

I have already indicated the value participants placed on the DIY aspect of punk music, but I will now broaden the discussion to show how this ethos can be seen in all aspects of punk culture. The importance that most participants placed on the DIY aspect of punk cannot be stressed enough; this aspect was seen as the epitome of the culture because it gave punk its sense of autonomy and resistance. It was also, as Mark, aged forty plus, an established male participant, said, one of »the main things [sic] to come out of punk [...] and that continues to this day«. This comment adds weight to my broader argument that the DIY ethos is central to understanding why punk has continued. Mark further explained:

»Anyone can still form a band, anyone can start a website, anyone can put on shows, anyone can use the internet to get in touch on a world wide scale outside the entertainment industries idea of what we should listen to or what we should watch and this still really thrills me and still really inspires me.«

The enthusiasm for the DIY ethos expressed here was typical. Participants frequently indicated how the subculture promoted creativity through this ethos.

A major part of the DIY ethos is that it also gives those involved a sense of being part of a collective. This was a particularly important aspect for forty-year-old Rob:

»There is a generous, caring thing going on. The whole process of releasing music, producing fanzines and so on involves the creation of relationships and friendships. I do it because it's caring, ethical. People have been nice to me and I want to be nice back and help people out as much as I can.«

This comment highlights some of the key points raised so far in this paper; in particular the emphasis on mutual aid. It shows how the musical and social aspects of punk intersect in its underlying philosophy. In other words, for older participants punk is »a way of thinking« (R81, male, age 40) that affects their daily lives.

So far, I have identified the key reasons why adults remain involved in punk subculture. In the next part of the paper, I will consider what impact other commitments might have on involvement, and how subcultural involvement is maintained.

How Subcultural Participants Negotiate Their other Responsibilities

I begin this section by drawing attention to the slogan in the title of this paper, which is part of a T-shirt design that depicts a cartoon caricature of an ageing male punk. I assume the designer¹³ to have been inspired by the ageing punk population and intended it to be a humorous reflection of the spatial difference, as noted by Bennett (2006), between older and younger individuals on the dance floor at punk gigs.¹⁴ However, it might also imply that having other commitments forces older punks to »stand back« from subcultural activities. On this point, my investigation shows that participation typically decreases as other commitments, such as children and work, take priority. In fact, my survey shows that having young children is the most common reason for a decline in subcultural involvement. The time and financial constraints imposed by employment, having a mortgage and children meant that participation was sometimes compromised to the extent that some took a break from the subculture, as was the case with a thirty-nine-year-old who said, »due to other commitments (children) I dropped out and just attended occasional gigs« (R67). On this point, I follow Linda Andes (1999) who discovered that the punks in her study experienced »ebbs and flows« in their involvement, depending on what other options and commitments they had.

Children

My research shows that those older participants who managed to »juggle« parental responsibilities with subcultural involvement did so in various ways. For instance, where possible, some parents took their children with them to punk gatherings, such as festivals and punx picnics.¹⁵ More usually, though, just like other parents, those involved in the subculture relied upon informal support networks when they attended gigs, rehearsed or, in one

13 The designer could not be sourced.

14 In contrast to Bennett, my observations found it was not unusual to see older punks occupying the same space on the dance floor as younger ones.

15 These gatherings are held during the summer months in public parks in towns and cities throughout the UK. They typically involve punks engaging in alcohol consumption, eating, socializing, and listening to recorded (sometimes live) punk music.

case, toured with their band. As Chloe, aged 26, the wife of Ade, explained,¹⁶

»we are not able to do any sort of mini tours [...]. We have been asked to play Czech Republic, but we can only do 2 or 3 days because we don't want to leave the little ones for any longer, especially since mine and [Ade's] son would have both parents absent. I don't think it is a major problem [...]; we all work around our parental responsibilities, the way I see it, is that family comes first.«

This comment supports what has been said elsewhere about parental responsibilities taking priority, despite the importance of subcultural activities. On the whole, then, parents seemed to accept the need to compromise on the level of involvement with the subculture; at least until their children were older.

Another way that parents, with young children, maintained contact (albeit virtual) with the subculture was through the World Wide Web. I discovered two mothers, each with a young child, relied heavily on the internet. One described her »getting e-mail« as »an attempt to readdress some balance« in her restricted involvement (R63, age 39). The second, Bex, had become involved with »punk rock craft« via the internet,¹⁷ which had led to her broadening her UK and American punk contacts. While I found the internet was also important to male punks, the examples here might indicate that this is more so where females with young children are concerned. This may be particularly true, since my research shows that female subcultural participation is affected for longer periods than males due to the practical implications of pregnancy and breast-feeding. It was also usual for females to be responsible for children where relationships had ended.¹⁸ It is possible, then, that these factors may contribute to why Bennett (2006) noticed a complete absence of older punk women at gigs (though, I should mention that this was not my experience).

16 Although under the age of thirty, I have included evidence from Chloe because the remaining band members (one of whom was her husband) were over thirty.

17 Bex informed me that the activity originated in the United States and was heavily influenced by the DIY ethic of punk subculture. Punk crafters apply the DIY, non-profit making approach of punk, to the creation of clothing, artwork, books and toys, which are then swapped at punk craft fairs. Besides emphasising the importance of the DIY ethos, the links between this and the music are further enhanced in that some of these punk crafters have made their track listings available for others.

18 This said, my research identified two male punks who were single parents.

Work

A survey finding shows that most (81 per cent) of those aged thirty and above, were in employment. Although the survey did not ask respondents to specify their job, punks I spoke to were employed in a variety of positions in both public and private sectors (including government agencies). There was also a self-employed tattooist, a body-piercist, and a small scale punk clothing designer and manufacturer. Punk's rejection of conformity, part of which involved being employed in ›the system‹, clearly highlights an obvious tension. Some individuals themselves recognised this, but most accepted work as a necessary aspect of their lives.

Perhaps a more obvious question for employed punks concerns what they do about their appearance (where this applies, of course).¹⁹ Unless individuals have a job where this does not matter, or in some cases might even be welcomed (as with tattooing, piercing, or alternative clothing sales), then compromising one's appearance was usual²⁰ – though not without exception, as the case of Stephan Oates, demonstrates. He was a thirty-five-year-old punk who, in 2002, was suspended from his warehouse job because his hairstyle was ›too wacky‹ (Anon. 2002: 1).²¹ (The company informed Stephan that ›it is crucial that we present the right image‹, and clearly they did not see his punk hairstyle as fitting with this. Making a stance, Stephan protested: ›My eccentric hairstyle is a part of me – it's not a phase I'm going through. I'm 35 years old and I've been coming to work like this for 12 years. I have to express my individuality‹ (ibid.: 2). This shows how style can be used not only to defy conventions, but also has deeper connotations, to do with an individual's struggle for identity (Roseneil/ Seymour 1999) and civil liberty.

19 It is important to recognise that, regardless of age, some participants choose not to have a ›punk‹ appearance.

20 It was often the case that male punks were forced to compromise on their hairstyle due to them balding. In such cases, keeping the hair very short or shaving it off completely was usual. It was also the case, as Bennett (2006: 225) notes, that some older individuals opted for a ›low maintenance‹ punk hairstyle because it was less time-consuming.

21 Stephan's hair was spiky and dyed blond with black streaks.

Advantages of Being an Ageing Participant

So far this paper has considered only the complications of being an older participant in punk subculture, but, as Bennett (2006) notes, there are also positive aspects. I shall now consider these in relation to my research.

To begin with, those with childcare responsibilities frequently increased their level of involvement with the subculture when their children were older.²² Further, many older participants said they had more money than when they were younger, and so could afford to attend more punk gatherings, including those further afield. As one put it, »[I] can do a lot more because I earn more money and I have the means and resources to do other things apart from just being in a band and buying records« (R125, male, 37 years). Older participants also made comments about their time management, like this thirty-three-year-old male: »I can organise my time a lot better now that I am older« (R83). Of course there is more to it than a matter of skill. It is coupled with a developed knowledge of the structure of the subculture and its politics, and, for some, an experience of being involved with subcultural activities.

Some individuals draw on this resource to offer practical advice and assistance to other, often younger, less experienced participants. Others used the resource to continue, or begin for the first time, to engage in the organisational aspect of punk culture. In fact, my survey shows that older participants were more active in all organisational and musical aspects of punk subculture, including the organization of gigs (62 per cent), and being in a band (64 per cent). Older individuals also tended to be more involved in other music related activities, including the running of record labels, sound engineering and, owning a recording studio. Some of these individuals commented on how experience made them confident in their ability to engage in such activities; this is indicated by the following comment: »The older I get the more experience I have and the more I have to contribute« (R172, male, 38 years).

Further, such individuals expressed a sense of satisfaction from providing practical advice and assistance to the less experienced. Some also said such involvement had not only given them a sense of personal achievement but also a more altruistic sense of satisfaction, knowing that it would contribute to punk's longevity.

22 In fact, it was not uncommon for older children of punks to become participants themselves.

Another positive aspect where ageing seemed to benefit participants was in the general admiration they received from their younger, less experienced counterparts. Central to this is an awareness of the accumulated knowledge and experience gained through long participation, and, importantly, the maintenance of unconventional ideals (what Thornton (1995) would describe as having »subcultural capital«). As one young female participant said: »I respect them. I admire them. You hope that you'll be exactly the same and that you're ethics and morals stay as theirs has [sic]« (P31, age 15). Sustained commitment, then, can place the individual in a position of expertise and influence; and perhaps contributes to their reaching a »forefather« status (Bennett 2006: 228). Further, as mentioned above, the willingness to pass on knowledge and experience to younger, less experienced participants was often remarked upon by older participants, who saw this as essential to the subculture's continuity.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that, while musical taste and nostalgia accounted for a continued interest in punk music, they themselves were not sufficient factors in explaining commitment to the subculture. To explain individuals' continued involvement, notions such as belonging and identity, as well as holding particular values and beliefs (especially the DIY ethos), appear to be significant. The paper has also indicated that while having other commitments often means that subcultural involvement is compromised, this doesn't necessarily mean that disengagement from the subculture is inevitable. In fact, participants' efforts to negotiate ways of continuing their involvement demonstrate how significant the subculture is to them. This is further substantiated by ageing participants utilising their knowledge and experience to contribute to the subculture's longevity. Importantly, contrary to the slogan in the title of this paper, this finding suggests that older punks do not always stand at the back!

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