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Sold out or Bought in? Complexities of the X Swatch as subcultural accessory for the straight edge scene

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Abstract

This research explores lifestyle consumerism and inquires into a subcultural community's use of a mainstream fashion object to express alternative values. The 'X-rated Swatch Watch' is extremely popular within straight edge, a clean-living punk offshoot in which participants abstain from alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. Swatch first released the watch in 1987 with a black band and white face featuring a large black 'X,' a prominent symbol in the straight edge scene visible on clothing, in tattoos, and drawn on hands. The limited-edition watch became highly collectable on the second-hand market and was re-released by Swatch in 2018 with design changes including larger size and more color options. The first and second incarnations of the watch, as well as knockoffs, indicate aesthetic trends in the fashion cycle, evolutions as well as stagnations in subcultural individual and community expression, and the complexities of a mass market item that has multiple cultural meanings within the same time period. In this paper, we use qualitative mixed methods to explore the significance of the watch for United States straight edgers who own or express interest in the watch. Primary data collection included surveys, social media discussions, participant observation, and archive visits. Results indicate that wearers utilize this watch to strengthen their straight edge identity and communal connections to similar individuals and to the historic lineage of their lifestyle. X Swatch consumers are not overly concerned with the duality of subcultural and mainstream meanings as they compartmentalize their community from wider society.

Keywords

Subculture, straight edge, punk, fashion, consumer behavior, identity, authenticity

INTRODUCTION

The X-Rated Swatch is an iconic item of dress. That participants in the straight edge subculture would accept, even celebrate, this watch seems potentially contradictory, as it is a limited-edition concept that also represents the lifestyle of straight edge. It is a 'get it now' product, and yet it has been readily adopted by a community that values a lasting, even lifetime, commitment to stringent ideals. This paper inquires the value and possible duality of this sartorial product for a community that is known for its conscientious consumption.

Swatch released the original watch in 1987, just as straight edge (sXe) coalesced into a movement via the efforts of 'youth crew,' a musical subgenre of hardcore punk spearheaded by bands such as Youth of Today. When Swatch first released the watch, straight edgers (sXers) were excited to have a mainstream item that not only possessed a 'cool factor' but also quickly signified their burgeoning lifestyle. As they went off the market, the watches instantly became collectors' items within the underground culture. In 2018 the brand re-released the watch to great acclaim within the now-global sXe scene. Straight edgers met the re-release of the watch enthusiastically, as previously they had to look to resale markets and reproductions if they wanted to purchase the watch.

The watch serves as an instant identity cue within the sXe community and communicates their lifestyle to others. Worn on the wrist, it is highly visible, sending a simultaneously clear and subtle message to others in the know. As a simple aesthetic cue, the watch's X symbol fosters communal affirmation and connection. However, wearers can easily take this item on and off; thus, its temporary signs of identity conflict with the deep lifestyle commitments undertaken by sXers in the scene.

The watch raises questions about the relationship between subcultures and capitalism, as it is a mass market product used by a niche community for their needs. Kyla, a sXe punk, noted this tension:

I have seen kids with the x watch at shows for as long as I've been going to shows. It's a way of indicating identity via style. Like the Black Flag [band] bars tattoo, it's a signifier of who you are and what you're into. I can also admit the problem with this, connected to the problem of capitalism as a whole, that we feel the need to buy things to define ourselves. (Kyla)

The intense enthusiasm and consumer demand for a mass market item shown by a subculture provokes questions concerning the value and multiple meanings of this garment to sXers. All three authors of this paper identify with and participate in this and/or related subcultures and witnessed subcultural appropriation of mainstream fashions first-hand. In this paper, we investigate the complexities of meaning around how sXers use the X-Rated Swatch, a 'mainstream' fashion item, to express a subcultural collective identity. We demonstrate how participants reconcile their appropriation of a mass-market item with their desire for DIY, subcultural authenticity. The watch becomes a tool of distinction, both within the scene and between insiders and outsiders. We also consider the gendered meanings of the watch and its nostalgic value. Finally, we conclude by noting how sXers subvert the consumerist intentions and meanings of the Swatch, giving it 'secret,' subcultural significance that nearly spans the life of the movement.



Figure 1. 2005. Straight edgers wearing the first version of the X-rated Swatch, several including plastic guards to protect the watch face. Also, they have hand drawn temporary X's on

their hands, offering multiple cues of their subcultural identity. This photo has gone viral as highly representative of the sXe scene. Photo courtesy of survey participant Sarah who is pictured.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

What Is Straight Edge

Straight Edge emerged in early 1980s in Washington, D.C., as the first wave of punk gave way to hardcore punk, a much more abrasive version of the 70s style of punk. Taking inspiration from D.C. band Minor Threat's songs 'Straight Edge' and 'Out of Step,' some punk youth began to abstain from drugs, tobacco, alcohol, and in some cases 'casual' or 'conquest' sex (Haenfler 2006; Wood 2006). Minor Threat singer Ian MacKaye loved the art and politics of punk but had no interest in the substance use and abuse prevalent in the scene and amongst his other peers. Straight edge quickly spread to Boston, New York, Nevada, Southern California, and elsewhere, largely connected to the growing hardcore music scene, and has since proliferated around the world. While in the context of the U.S., white men have dominated straight edge. Women and people of color have had a sizeable presence in many scenes and the 2010s saw a significant increase in their participation. Many participants or members link their straight edge identity with progressive causes, especially animal liberation and veganism (Stewart 2017).

The 'X' became Straight Edge's universal symbol when club owners would mark underage youths' hands with large 'X's as a signal to bartenders to avoid serving them alcoholic beverages (Rettman 2017). Kids wanted to see live music but club owners denied them access to venues serving alcohol; marking hands with 'X's provided a practical solution that kids later transformed into a mark of pride and defiance. The 'X' caught on when the cover for the hardcore punk band, Teen Idles' 1980 *Minor Disturbance* ep featured a close-up image of a punk's hands, each marked with an 'X' and crossed in an 'X' position. In 1982, Boston's SS Decontrol (SSD) released *The Kids Will Have Their Say* on X-Claim! Records and later played a song of the same name. Following SSD's centering of sXe in their music, Youth of Today's 1986 *Break Down the Walls* showed charismatic singer Ray Cappo with 'X'd up hands, as did several of their later records. Straight edge was becoming a movement and 'X's increasingly became visible not only on records, but also T-shirts and jackets. In the midst of this youth crew era of bands (approximately 1986-1991), Swatch released the 'X-rated' watch in 1987.

Straight edgers continue to incorporate the 'X' into a variety of creative or stylistic displays. Straight edgers were known for their intolerance and outspokenness about their beliefs, which is apparent in their clothing and adornment choices which all nodded to their affiliation and ethos. Their beliefs were considered radical in the increasingly hedonistic mainstream, so they utilized dress as a tool to draw the attention of outsiders, and as a signal to other members. Many tattoo 'X's on their bodies, including thick 'X's inscribed on the top of hands. Numerous hardcore songs such as Bold's 'Nailed to the X' allude to the 'X's significance and bands such as CLEARxCUT and With X War include the X in their names. Straight edgers regularly incorporate 'X's into their social media handles and email addresses. Straight edge merchandising companies such as Straight Edge Worldwide and True Till Death center the 'X' in many of their designs. While not all straight edgers display 'X's (or any other sXe signifiers), all *do* understand the 'X' and what it represents. The symbol's ubiquity is such that despite their diverse experiences and contexts, sXers all over the world recognize and use it to communicate their collective identity.

Swatch and Fashion

Launched in 1983, the Swiss Swatch brand positioned itself from the start as knowledgeable of trends and niche subcultures, targeting ‘fashionable young people’ and cultivating pop cache and collectability. Swatch quickly became the second largest watch manufacturer in the world (Thompson 2017). ‘Right from its inception, the Swatch phenomenon became so popular that by 1985, the company had sold 3.5 million watches in the United States alone’ (Anwar 2012: 753). During the 1980s and 90s watches as fashion accessories grew alongside a trend of label and iconography-conscious consumers. Consumers sought out brands such as Fossil, Guess, and Swatch as much for design as for function. The Swatch watch’s quartz and plastic construction, combined with its simple purpose as a fashion accessory, kept prices low, making the watch highly accessible and therefore readily accepted by youth culture. These materials further reinforced the watch’s temporary nature, associated with plastic items that can be made quickly, cheaply, and on trend (Thompson, 2017). Frequently releasing a variety of designs in limited runs became a signature of the brand. Because of these production practices, a collectors’ and resale market grew for Swatch products. The X-Rated design became a hot collectible due to the duality of the brand’s general collectability and its desirability within the sXe subculture. Thus, the company was very likely aware of the built-in enthusiasm when they decided to re-issue the X Rated years later. The popularity of the X design spurred a number of knock offs by other manufacturers tapping into the sXe market.

The year of the 2018 re-issue, net sales increased by 6.1% (Swatch Group 2018). We could not determine the specific sales data per product for the brand as it is not publicly released, but there was particularly strong growth in the first half of the year (Swatch Group 2018), corresponding with the watch’s re-release in April. Therefore, we can assume that the watch re-issue was successful and this enterprising business decision may have been informed by knowing the watch’s value within the sXe community. While the company did not explicitly target sXe individuals through marketing tactics such as advertisements featuring sXers or the use of influencers who are scene leaders, we noted a conversation with an employee at a Swatch store in the Newark airport who said she had been to a training seminar about sXe prior to the release of the new Swatch.

Subculture, Stylistic Homogeneity and Centralized Identities

Subcultures serve as an adaptation to mainstream culture for youth, providing participants with a sense of belonging, comradery, and shared identity while establishing autonomy from their parents and/or a perceived mainstream culture (Polhemus 2010). Seeking acceptance and support from others is especially important for youth as they navigate the uncertainty of adolescence. Adornment is an important outlet for youth to exclaim both their individuality and their affiliation to certain groups or collectives; indeed, distinctive style has been central to a variety of post-war subcultural formations, from skinhead and punk to goth and hip hop. Participation in social groups, including subcultures or scenes, affords youth the opportunity to test and consolidate various identities. Subcultures provide youth space to express individuality while connecting to a meaningful collective identity – participants can be individuals, but together (Davis 1992). Although post-subcultural paradigms (e.g. Muggleton 2000) theorize a transition from homogenous to transient subcultural identities, local spaces still afford youth collective aesthetic experiences, including music and style.

Dress functions as a personal signature and an expression of one's own creative imagination and aspirations. Fashion and clothing help to shape our perceptions of ourselves, and simultaneously acts as a sartorial representation of ourselves, including personality, values, attitudes, and ideologies (Entwistle 2000; Kaiser 2012). Viewers use clothing as a cognitive stimulus to help form impressions and make sense of social interactions. Style choice has also been the basis for deliberate, distinctive boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Davis 1992; Hodkinson 2002; Rattansi and Phoenix 2005).

Traditionally, subcultural style symbolically communicates participation in and devotion to a particular subculture, making the sartorial element of group membership basic to subcultural identity because dress is a visual language that reflects the shared understanding of a culture to both members of the subculture and those on the outside (Entwistle 2000). Moreover, subcultural style is an expression of hyper-individualism. This is especially true in unconventional postmodernity where subcultural practice allows participants to construct their own sociocultural identities through the creative consumption of cultural goods that not only reflect one's relationship to a social group but also a symbolic expression of resistance to the mainstream (Bennett 2011).

Subcultural clothing and adornment are also symbolically significant within a group because they determine an individual's commitment to the stylistic codes of the subculture. In this sense, participants use clothing as *subcultural capital*-artifacts that represent specialized knowledge accumulated through socialization (Thornton 1997). Subcultural capital, accumulated in part through consumption, includes goods such as clothing, hairstyles, and tattoos that subculturists associate with commitment and allegiance to the subculture (Bennett 2011; Moore 2005). Subculturalists maintain a hierarchy of status by means of a conscious and mutually selected set of standards (Hodkinson 2002). A person with more subcultural capital can claim more authenticity and a higher status than someone with less. Within many niche subcultures there is a history of collecting practices where obtaining items the scene has deemed of value, sometimes in multiples, reinforces commitment, especially if the items are scarce and thus there is insider knowledge and devotion shown with the acquisition. This is seen for example in collecting of sneakers, records, skateboards, and may represent authenticity and nostalgia (e.g., Goulding 2002; Hodkinson 2013). However, participants may perceive those who are overly preoccupied with stylistic expression as trying too hard and accuse them of being non-genuine, or even fake (e.g., Muggleton 2000). Straight edge does not have a rigid, consistent stylistic 'uniform'; participants display a variety of styles, ranging from clean-cut and preppy to fully tattooed and punk rock. Yet stylistic trends and patterns still emerge, with band shirts, 'X's, and the X Swatch serving as subcultural capital.

Other perspectives, situated in a more global context, maintain that young people can appropriate cultural commodities and construct their own authenticity and cultural meanings (Blackman 2005). Adoption of a style does not necessarily reflect an expression of personal or group ideology possessing an 'inner difference' has been, at times, valued more than subcultural capital. Furthermore, those individuals who consume subcultural style without participation in the subculture only adopt the style once it has been commercially produced and popularized by the mainstream. The resulting pre-packaged sartorial style appears to have no underlying meaning or significance, thus negating its authenticity (Moore 2005).

METHODOLOGY

To grasp straight edgers' understandings of X watches, we employed a qualitative, mixed-method approach including an online survey, social media observations, and participant observation. After Swatch re-released the X-Swatch, we noticed considerable and intriguing conversation about the watch in our social and research networks. In 2018, we posed social media inquiries into our personal and group social media pages to generate conversational threads. This generated a convenience sample of participants with whom we could directly engage with a short survey.

In 2019, we then deployed a brief Survey Monkey survey of nine open-ended questions via social media networks such as relevant Facebook groups (e.g. Straight Edge). We conceived the questions in part based on what we initially learned from the conversational threads on social media prior. Our insider knowledge and prior relationships helped us create relevant questions, as well as established some legitimacy with potential contacts. Through this convenience sample, we received responses from 23 U.S. sXers over age 18. Questions on Facebook and the survey addressed the meanings that participants associate with the watches (original and new versions); opinions of the watch design; where/how they purchased a watch; what they thought of other, non-Swatch X watches; and in which contexts they wear/do not wear the watch.

We also observed social media posts and followed hashtags; for example, nearly all of the 580 posts under the Instagram #xswatch hashtag referenced sXe. We noted how participants narrated and displayed their watches, particularly at the time of Swatch's re-release. Also, [author 3] conducted fieldwork at ten hardcore shows featuring sXe bands in the United States and five in England, including a performance by a South Korean group. [The author] jotted memos during the shows and later fleshed the out into more descriptive and thorough fieldnotes. These observations allowed us to note the prevalence of X watches worn in situ by a variety of musicians and audience members, as well as how the watch is situated amongst other sXe signifiers. Related, [author 1] reviewed relevant data from their multi-year study of punk and fashion merchandising in the United States, including sXers, who discuss the role of dress in their identity work, via surveys, interviews, and as seen in archival contents.

We analyzed data using a grounded theory approach, thereby creating new and original categories rather than relying on already existing coding schemes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This process involved examining, noting, and coding survey responses and field notes to observe patterns and conceptual themes. We compiled phrases and terms that summarized participant responses for each question. We then compared the resulting categories with descriptions of each theme from existing literature on sXe, which the first author had established prior to coding. We cross-checked different data sources, noting similarities but also testing emergent conclusions. This analysis revealed a number of patterns and for the purposes of this paper we focused on the consumers' experiences. The results section details the categories and sub-content that arose out of our data collection. Each section highlights a prominent theme emergent from our analysis including Enthusiasm, Communication, Mainstream Capitalism, and Value.

RESULTS: WHAT DOES THE WATCH MEAN TO STRAIGHT EDGERS?

Enthusiasm: Reissue Excitement

When Swatch released the re-issue X-Rated watch in 2018, word spread quickly in the sXe scene. While Swatch did not intentionally market the object to the community, when the company first announced the release excited sXers created significant buzz around the collectible, through online or in-person dialogue. The excitement resulting from the recent re-issue differed slightly from that of the original issue. Following the initial release in 1987, sXers

learned about the watch through record album images, word-of mouth, and the media of the scene such as zines, which are DIY, self-published magazines circulated to a select small group. This association between the X watch and the scene formed naturally, and subsequently tied the object to community values.

I know that the original x swatch was a part of Edge aesthetics much like letterman jackets. I learned about it while looking at pictures of letterman jackets and later through other folks who are Straight Edge. I personally purchase various items with Xs on them and so the appeal was very much there. (La Tisha)ⁱ

The reference by this participant to letterman jackets is a point of comparison where this Swatch is similar to other items the scene values for collecting and evoking nostalgia and belonging. Early sXers relied upon face-to-face community and word of mouth to learn about the original issue, reinforcing the importance of the subcultural bond. The 2018 reissue used the same sources but with the addition of social media, which allowed participants even greater control over the message and images. Social media fostered in-scene marketing of the watch, creating a digital bricolage that served as branding and advertising.

The 2018 watches sold out quickly, prompting people to pursue alternate means of getting one. Those unfortunate enough to miss out relied upon friends who bought multiples, reselling within the scene, or even purchasing in different regions:

I had to order mine in Canada! I lost my original one so I was stoked to get it. (Sarah)

I own a black X swatch reissue. Days before the reissue was released, my brother (who is straightedge, like me), sent me a link to the swatch website announcing the release. I was thrilled. On the day of the release, I took a ten-minute break from work to sit in front of my computer with the swatch site open, and clicked add to cart the second they went on sale. I was already too late, and I was bummed. Purple and red were still available, but I really wanted black. Fortunately for me, my brother bought two, one for him and one for me. (Kyla)

The watch also appealed to those who owned a previous version and desired different models or were looking to replace one they had lost or broken. Furthermore, multiple people purchased it in all colors or in duplicate, which could indicate enthusiasm, commitment, or conspicuous consumption, which means the buyer purchased the watch to enhance their prestige or image within the scene.

I owned an original one back in late 90s/ early 2000s I bought from a friend. Now I have 3 of the new ones, bought day of release in black, red and purple. (Julia)

One participant purchased and wore a new watch despite no longer practicing the sXe lifestyle, suggesting that some former sXers might still want to express their ongoing sense of kinship with the subculture.

Communication: Expressing a Collective Identity

Straight edgers deploy the X watch to communicate their commitment to a collective identity. Subcultural style involves nonverbal cues and codes, such as dress and ~~argot~~ jargon/slang, to create a sense of community and shared identity. Subcultural participants may use secretive phrases and handshakes or symbolic consumption to outwardly indicate their group allegiance and convey this group affiliation to the wider public. Participants in the current study indicated this is true of either version of the X watch.

[R]ecently my wife and I were on vacation in NYC and I said hey there's a couple of straightedge guys at that pizza place and she asked how I could tell and I said for one thing, three of the four of them have X swatches. (Evan)

The X is a simple and effective tool as a cultural symbol, and the simplicity of its design functions well on the small face of a watch, closely mimicking the X that some sXers still draw on their hands. Less permanent and obtrusive than even permanent marker, the watch enables sXers to conveniently (and cleanly) express their identity in a variety of social settings (including the workplace) with little chance of social repercussions.

Communication: Duplicity of Meaning

Since the X watch is a mass market item repositioned by sXers as a subcultural item we asked participants if they feel a sense of ownership over it and their reaction when non-sXe people wear the watch. Most, like Julie, expressed indifference:

I'm sure there are people who wear the X watch outside the scene. It makes no difference either way, as long as they like the watch. Not sure if they're targeting straight edge kids with the watch or not, but if the edge kids want to buy them, more power to them. (Julie)

As Swatch does not expressly market the watch for sXers' use, different users could interpret the X to suit varied aesthetic needs. Straight Edge observers report rarely seeing it in contexts beyond the sXe scene, and thus they are not threatened by the potential for widespread outside use.

When non-Straight Edge people wear the Swatch watch, like in their ads, it reminds me that is just a product from a company that has no connection to our community. (Dan)

We were unable to obtain demographic sales data and so cannot determine how many watch buyers do and do not self-identify as sXe. Regardless, participants understood that 'normal' people might wear the watch, reinforcing the duplicity of meaning and use:

I figured they made it for a general audience, so it's ok (but a little funny) when a normal person wears one. (Joe)

Some wearers mentioned they could see it associated with 1960s civil rights leader Malcom X, or possibly the Los Angeles 1980s punk band X, and some simply indicated the X may appeal to those looking to add an edge to their look via the watch's graphic design.

To the rest of the world, unless you were maybe into Malcolm X, it doesn't seem to have that much appeal to the wider world. I have no feelings about other people outside the scene wearing the watch other than curiosity of why they wear it or being mildly amused by seeing them wearing it. (Samuel)

Straight edgers expressed more frustration with non-sXe people who knowingly wore the watch despite being aware of its deep significance to the sXe scene. Considered 'posers', some sXers perceive them as attempting to steal a valued subcultural item, solely for the outward aesthetic, without attempting to understand its subcultural significance. This attitude reflects tension between the well-intentioned goal to take mass market items and make them subcultural, but then feeling irritation when the broader public still uses the item.

While they do not mind much when mass market wearers use them, or other niche resistance cultures, they do take issue when people who understand the sXe code inauthentically wear the watch, as indicated in the below examples:

I get that people who don't know about hardcore may wear them. A punk former edge person would give me pause. (Harjit)

People should be able to wear what they want but be prepared to be called a poser if you can't explain what it means. Lol! (Del)

Communication: Design and Gender

Watches have historically been generational heirloom pieces and gendered possessions rather than 'fashion' - their mechanization has become a metaphor for masculinity (Langmead 2009; Stephens 2000). During the first World War, the US Army issued wristwatches because they were more convenient to use than pocket watches. Since then, watches have become acceptable male ornamentation in societies where fanciful male body decoration is traditionally unacceptable. The fashion industry caters to a narrow performance of masculinity and strength by designing robust, highly technical watches that mirror those worn by soldiers, pilots, race car drivers, and even astronauts. In the menswear industry, watches have become status items akin to handbags for women or sneakers for street style consumers. It is not uncommon for such companies to re-issue items to further drive their demand (e.g., re-issue of Nike Air Jordans from past fashion cycles).

Because sXe has a history of more male participants and a proclivity for a more masculine aesthetic, the adoption of the watch by sXers is unsurprising. Some participants recognized the larger size of the newer watch and speculated that Swatch may be catering to a male base and reinforcing the social construction of watches as masculine technical objects:

[M]y perception is that the new one is larger, which either is jumping on the large watch bandwagon, or is trying to target men more. (Joe)

Watches constitute a high-status item in the fashion industry and often command high prices. As highly visible accessories they serve as nonverbal cues of status and lifestyle; Apple watches, Fitbits, Rolexes, and Shinola all carry meanings for both owners and observers. Today, anyone can own a purse, a watch, or a pair of shoes, but specific brands of purses, watches, and shoes are a distinguishing feature for certain classes of consumers (Han 2010: 15).

Swatch seemed to want to capitalize on the nostalgia of the original watch while also clearly marking the re-issue as something new. In addition to the larger face, the newer watch comes in a variety of colors, largely embraced by sXers:

I appreciate that the vibe is still the same however the large face can be bothersome at points. I think it's rad there are other color options however I only own it in black. I definitely think if they made a camo version it would be purchased just as often as the black version. (La Tisha)

Contrary, perhaps, to the larger (masculine) face, the introduction of more colors may be an effort to reach beyond the male demographic. Producing several colors enabled Swatch to capitalize on the sXe collectors' market, largely dominated by men. Indeed, we observed on social media a number of sXers (primarily men) displaying three different colored watches on their wrist.

The first ones I saw were fun, unisex, and I'm not sure the company's original intent was to create a straight edge watch. Now they seem more like collector's items. (Nancy)

Indeed, subcultures – including punk, hardcore, and sXe – regularly *reflect* the male domination while they ostensibly seek to *reject* in mainstream culture (LeBlanc 1999). Straight Edge bands and record labels (mostly men) produce apparel meant primarily for men: for example, letter jackets, sports jerseys with band logos, and shirts with hyper masculine imagery that are not form-fitted. This may mirror scene demographics, as men outnumber women, trans, and non-binary sXers approximately three to one (Author 3, n.d.). Yet regardless of the gender distribution, women-identifying subculturists consistently straddle a tightrope between rejecting and fulfilling expectations of emphasized femininity. There are always criticisms of a subculturist woman's stylistic choices from both the subcultural group refuting her commitment and authenticity, as well as the mainstream culture refuting her femininity. As the sXe scene becomes increasingly diverse, both women and men have adopted the X watch in roughly equal measure, even with its larger size and regardless of Swatch's (possible) intentions. The watch, simultaneously coded masculine and unisex, reflects a (slow and incomplete) transition in the scene.



Figure 2: 2020. The X-rated Swatch watch in its original and reissued size and design difference, as demonstrated by and photo courtesy of participant Kyla who owns both incarnations.

Communication: Temporality of Identity

The X Swatch is an identity marker, yet wearers can easily put it on and take it off. In this way it reflects its origin of the temporary X marked on the hand with a Sharpie marker. It is more expensive and harder to get than a marker, yet less permanent and costly than a tattoo. Some subculturists tone down subcultural cues to integrate aesthetically into the mainstream, particularly as they age (Haenfler 2012). Wearers expressed a variety of views regarding which contexts they think the watch should be worn. Their level of commitment and how they position the sXe lifestyle within the rest of their daily interactions and identities impacts their usage of the watch. The watch is a convenient, innocuous, and relatively ‘safe’ identity marker; sXers do not express worry that regularly wearing the watch might stigmatize them in some way. Any reluctance to wearing the watch comes from worry about its fragility/durability and longevity.

I often wear it when I go to shows or go on outings for work. I don’t wear it every day because I don’t want to ruin it. I have thought of purchasing another one so I could wear it for its intended purpose. (La Tisha)

Subculturists regularly demonstrate their affiliation through transparent (to insiders) cues like the X Swatch. Alternately, some participants in the study, and in previous studies of punk and sXe, indicate they take on and off subcultural fashion cues because they do not need the symbol anymore in their lives or it starts to have diminished returns. They do not feel the need to prove their involvement when the rest of their lifestyle choices such as occupation, diet, and parenting styles reflect their commitment to their scene’s ethos. ‘With emotional maturation and body changes, and as workplace roles change, the way they express punk is more subtle, more nuanced and quietly coded; in an effort to look age appropriate they end up looking more mainstream to the unknowing viewer outside the punk subculture, and reactions they receive in the workplace are perceived to be beneficial,’ (Sklar and DeLong 2012: 294). Others begin to feel that continuing to dress in a highly ‘spectacular’ manner associated with the visuals with youth culture, or using ‘youth’ vernacular, looks inappropriate after a certain age. Specific to sXe, ‘most who maintained a Straight Edge identity into adulthood shed some aspects of the hardcore ‘look’, displaying ‘X’s less (if at all) and adopting somewhat more conventional styles even as they continued to adhere to unconventional values,’ (Haenfler 2012:12). Furthermore, ‘some straight edgers cultivated a relatively conventional appearance, adding pieces of subcultural ‘flair’-a belt buckle, hipster haircut, vintage sneakers, slightly stretched ears, black clothes or a small tattoo. Such affections were personally meaningful and noticeable to others, but quiet enough so as not to disrupt or damage adult legitimacy (Haenfler 2012: 20).

It is a signifier without having to X up your hands. A more adult version of that. (Sarah)

Mainstream Capitalism: Subculture and a Corporate Product

Straight edgers are keenly aware that Swatch is a mass market company and that they are collecting an item that is not coming from within the DIY subculture or from in-scene or independent brands and designers. In fact, several enjoyed claiming and repositioning the object as their own:

[T]he best part about it was that it seemed like they accidentally made something that was just for us. (Joe)

Another wearer was more specific:

My perception at the time I originally got the watch in 87/88 was that it was less desirable and plain looking compared to other Swatch designs. It didn't seem as cool. With the added meaning of straight edge, it seemed way cooler. (Samuel)

The cue of the X gave them something to latch onto in a mass culture from which they often felt excluded. For sXe kids from the hardcore punk scene, that relatively unassuming X propels the watch from ordinary to highly coveted (Watamanuk 2018). Mainstream corporations regularly appropriate subcultural styles; for some participants, wearing the X Swatch felt like turning the tables:

I liked the idea that it was not produced for the purpose of hardcore or straightedge but had essentially been appropriated. (Samuel)

Mainstream Capitalism: Design and Manufacture Concepts

Many sXers extend their ethos of clean living to other aspects of their lives, especially their dietary choice. Most adopt vegetarian or vegan diets for animal rights reasons, expressing deep concerns related to the ethics of consumption and ethical supply chains. Since the X watch is a mass-produced fashion product, we wondered if participants questioned its sustainability and supply chain and how such concerns might impact their choices in relation to the watch. We did not do an in-depth analysis of Swatch's supply chain and are making no assertions about it, however according to a report issued by the Swatch Group in 2014, the company claims that ethical, environmental, and social concerns are integral to the ideology and procurement policy of the company (Swatch Group 2014). Findings indicated that generally most of the participants said they wished it was made ethically, but they did not do the research on supply chain prior to purchase or wear:

Something I do usually research when purchasing something. I was too excited at the possibility of getting this watch that I didn't think about ethical/sustainable production until just now when you asked. (Kyla)

Some hoped the watch reflected their sXe ethics of consumption:

[I]f it's being advertised as a Straight Edge watch, it better be following every ethical standard. (Carol)

Others expressed resignation about how many apparel products are produced but wished for more ethical and sustainable production practices:

I assumed they were produced with normal (not great) methods. it would be a plus if they used fair trade production. (Joe)

The enthusiasm for the watch outweighed any concerns they might have had about its origins. So, while participants did research new design styles, times of sale, and prices, often through community discussion of its scene value, they did not research production. We mention

this not as a criticism to sXe watch users, but to demonstrate which aspects of the re-issue the consumers most valued.

Mainstream Capitalism: Authenticity and Indie Alternatives

Like its progenitor punk, sXe has a history of antagonistic relationships to a perceived 'mainstream'. 'Mainstream' encompasses the dominant or conventional ideas, attitudes, brands, and styles of a particular time period. Participants in both scenes have long used mass market products to develop an aesthetic, while also creating internal designs and brands, ranging from Vivienne Westwood and Malcom McLaren's 1970s British styles sold in their boutique to the cottage industry now globally proliferating on the Internet. Yet participants typically place a higher value on DIY production. The original Swatch X watch became one of the few non-DIY signifiers in the early scene.

Back in the day, straight edge was still very new, so having this watch created solidarity amongst other SXE folks in the scene. Mostly everything SXE was homemade back in '82- '83. No one was very fashion conscious but now SXE fashion seems like a pretty decent business. (Nancy)

Now, however, several sXe businesses market a variety of sXe fashion items, as Nancy, a participant in the '80's scene, suggested. Similar-looking watches are being made and sold at places like independent store Headline Records in Los Angeles, CA, as well as from record labels within the scene and sXe-oriented clothing websites.

As we have noted, subculturists saturate fashions with authenticity or inauthenticity, constantly manipulating meaning and constructing 'realness'. In late capitalist/postmodern societies, identities are experimental images and style may not be 'anchored to any underlying sense of the self' (Muggleton 2000: 102), thus betraying social rules and order (Entwistle 2000). Some contemporary sXers expressed ambivalence about privileging the Swatch brand over scene-based alternatives:

I actually find it odd that a product can become a token for a subculture often opposed to capitalism. (Marike)

Some participants pointed out they do not feel less esteem from wearing bootleg watches, yet the Swatch version seemed to generate much more excitement than do similar, scene-produced knock offs.

I believe straightedge.org made one - I like it, but not as much as legit ones' (Joe).

[B]ootlegs were done by Victory and before that my friend Jordan did a bunch in New Brunswick. They were just x watch's not exact boots. Some say sxe. I got a new purple one cuz it's purple. (Rich)

There is also some discussion about authenticity and value as related to manufacturing quality.

One time for my birthday, the girl I was dating at the time gave me a knockoff x watch. I don't know where she got it. I loved it and wore it until it broke. I wore it because I wanted the look of the x watch, not necessarily the Swatch brand. Now that I have a swatch brand, I can see the vast difference in quality. I haven't broken this one yet! (Kyla)

Some participants indicated that their original watches broke due to a lack of care. A few bought the new watch and took aspects still functional from the old watch and merged them, thus creating a personalized version of both releases, a bricolage reflective of punk's postmodern sensibilities.

In this case, it appears that edgers' DIY and anti-capitalist ethics did not overcome the quality and cache of the Swatch brand, with its long history in the scene. While some participants suggested the watches produced by their scene effectively expressed the same symbolism as the Swatch brand, the Swatch, in either of its issue years, has somewhat more social cache and authenticity.



Figure 3: 2020. An independently designed watch featuring the X iconography. This version was inspired by sXe, hardcore music, and the original X-Rated Swatch. It was created by and photo courtesy of survey participant Phil, who is a jewelry designer and educator, as well as from the scene.

Value: Distinctions and Hierarchies

Subculturalists use fashion to create and signify a collective identity; they use style to both distinguish themselves from outsiders and to individually distinguish themselves amongst insiders (Thornton 1997). The X watch signifies an identity and value system sXe wearers feel distances them from others that do not understand their ethos.

‘I’ve been edge 21 years and the watch was a good symbol for the outside world where you couldn’t wear shirts, buttons, patches, etc., so still show commitment and have a conversation starter’ (Julia).

For some, sXe is about accomplishing and living out a commitment to sobriety. Others claim sXe as resistance to alcohol culture and the more general conformity they claim it represents. In

any case, the X Swatch embodies and communicates a value system to outsiders, a display that is meaningful to wearers even if others fail to grasp the watch's significance.

The watch can also become a symbol of distinction *within* the scene. Since the watch sold out, became a resale collectible, and then was reissued, it became an exclusive totem showing commitment - how far one would go to get one and whether one fully understood the coded meaning and value of the watch (especially the original) established by the early scene. By the 2010s, the relative scarcity of the original X Swatch meant that only a few older participants and particularly dedicated (and potentially affluent) younger sXers had them. Original watches could sell for hundreds of dollars. Some sXers saw little problem with that, while others viewed such extravagance as symbolic of a certain intra-scene elitism:

It's a status symbol, but to me the original 1987 watch is a way for some Straight Edge people to make themselves look better than other Straight Edge people. The new Swatch watch is a way for people to try to be like the elitists that had the 1987 watch. (Dan)

Survey data suggest most participants are unwilling to spend more than \$75 on a watch. Ideally, one would find a vintage watch for cheap from an unsuspecting outsider with no knowledge of its significance. But some younger sXers, even those with the new watch, were willing to save money to purchase an original, due to its historical significance to the scene:

I purchased the new black X swatch on the second run of watches. I initially intended to buy it the day of its release but it sold out while I had the item in my cart. I eventually want to purchase the original when I have enough money to get one vs other bills/needs. (La Tisha)

In a culture where many participants practice veganism and some tattoo 'X's on their necks, faces, and hands, a (removable) watch is not a primary indicator of commitment. More commonly, the X Swatch, both vintage and re-issue, served as a fun, shorthand identity marker. As Samuel suggests, the watch is nice to own and gives the wearer some feelings of exclusivity, even if it holds a variety of meanings to observers:

I liked the idea that, at least by the 90s, it was kind of rare and the fact that I just happened to already have one was kind of cool and exciting. This was always just tangential and not at all important as far as my feelings toward hardcore and straight edge in general. The concepts and ideals were of far greater importance to me. The watch was just a little fun bit of swag I suppose. (Samuel)

The re-issue, widely accessible, has both diminished and increased the subcultural capital inscribed in the original watch. Many more sXers have an X Swatch – it was not uncommon for [author 3] to observe over twenty watches as a single show – reducing its exclusivity by increasing its availability. Yet the very existence of the re-issue highlights that there is an *original*, a rarer and more desirable collectible that at least some participants aspire to own, due to its history and value from the origins of the sXe scene.

Value: Selling Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a learned emotional response in reaction to discontent or distrust of the present, a reaction to the demise of the community or a longing for a time when someone was younger (Adams 2008; Goulding 2002; Rutherford and Shaw 2011). Thus, nostalgia acts as a means of cultural restoration or preservation of something real or imagined.

Can't help but feel a little nostalgic seeing this Swatch. (Jacob)

And more recently it has become a marketing tactic for manufacturers to turn consumption into a hedonic, interpersonal experience, especially for those who have become detached or bored with the current consumer condition (Hartman and Brunk 2019). For some people, including subculturalists, nostalgia allows them to recapture and recreate their past lifestyles, identity, and even youth. Some sXers that are in their forties and fifties not only have the disposable income to spend on vintage subcultural items, but they are actually more willing to part with their money because such items cultivate past memories and foster social connectedness (Lasaleta et al. 2014).

Wearing nostalgic subcultural symbols, like the X Swatch, is yet another means to communicate or perform authentic identities (Adams 2008; Hodkinson 2013). The consumption of artifacts with nostalgic value gives people an instrument in which to preserve meaningful memories and maintain a temporal continuity of the self. Consuming vintage/old products communicates authenticity, which is considered the opposite of commerciality, as well as longevity in the scene.

For the participants in the current study, ownership of the watch is symbolic but not all that important for sustaining a sXe identity. However, multiple participants said they are willing to ask strangers wearing them if they can be purchased, especially if the stranger does not appear to be in the scene.

My perception at the time I originally got the watch in '87/'88 was that it was less desirable and plain looking compared to other Swatch designs. It didn't seem as cool. With the added meaning of straight edge it seemed way cooler. (Samuel)

Neither do participants feel that they must have an original or even reissue swatch to reaffirm their sXe identity (past and/or present) and authenticity. The reissue of the watch appears to be a form of playful nostalgia rooted in past experiences. However, it is not vital for cultivating a sense of belonging or visually declaring one's group membership, which parallels the anti-consumerist spirit of punk.

It doesn't have super deep meaning to me outside of nostalgia. (Mike)

CONCLUSIONS: ENTHUSIASM ABOUT VALUE, COMMITMENT, AND AUTHENTICITY OVER TIME

In this paper, we investigated sXers' experience of the reissued X-Rated watch by Swatch. Swatch is a mainstream, mass market brand, yet has always positioned itself as aligned with trends, affordable fashion, and popular culture – not, however, overtly with the sXe scene. Specifically, we looked at the watches' value within the scene and found it can serve as a tangible symbol, a cue, of group membership, especially worn in specific contexts. The design leans unisex or masculine, reflecting the original aesthetic of sXe, but has meaning to a diversity of current participants. Although the watch is a distinctive marker of the sXe culture, participants had mixed reactions about non-sXe consumers of the watch. We also found sXers did not

problematize the watch as a mass market product with ties to mainstream capitalism. Rather, they linked it to authenticity and highlighted its nostalgia value. They do not value the watch because it is expensive, since it is moderately priced when new. Swatch's affordability and branding links to edginess or trendy popular culture which may assist with its acceptance into this subculture in a manner that would not have been achieved by examples such as popular higher ticket Tag Heuer watches, or a Fossil brand in Swatch's price point.

The value comes from the scene collectively deciding it is special, even though they did not create the design or product within their community. What they did create was its appropriated meaning, perhaps blending Swatch's intentions (unconfirmed) with subcultural intentions making the watch an identity marker for the new wearers. In this bricolage of repurposing products and assigning subcultural value, participants do not find the subcultural use of a mainstream product hypocritical. Following punk protocol, they take the ready-made and re-tool its aesthetics and symbolism, both acknowledging original meaning and purpose while giving it a new almost secret life.

Punk embraces individualism and self-expression that is fluid, distinctive, and hybridized. It borrows elements of style from other subcultures without completely replicating their look. DIY has itself become symbolic of individualism and radical political ideologies, such as.... Yet there is a punk nature to how sXers have taken a mass market thing and made it their own. While a mass-marketed item, the watch serves a subcultural purpose, helping sXers show enthusiasm for and commitment to their ethos.

The process of the consumption often marks how insiders deem an object punk, as they learn value from in-scene media and peer interactions (Sklar and Donahue 2018). Thus, the X Swatch becomes a coveted punk item as early, and often charismatic, adopters wear it amongst their peers, teaching others its meanings, and encouraging its more widespread use. Enthusiasm and nostalgia intersect as the watch continues to be on the resale market at different quantities and price points. Interest wanes with distance from the initial excitement of the release date, but grows as the item becomes increasingly difficult to obtain. It could be the first version is devalued due to a new batch available, or perhaps the first version is even more nostalgic since now there is a redesign, and a new generation. This sort of fashion cycle within the subculture will ebb and flow over time.

The value of the X Swatch lies in ~~part~~ how it helps sXers mark their lived experiences over time. They have subverted the consumerist meaning of the Swatch and use it as a collective identity marker. They no longer consider the Swatch an exclusively mainstream item; they have manipulated the meaning of the X watch and passively subverted it from a fashion item to a piece of subcultural capital. The X Rated Swatch is a fashion product and status symbol within the community. Straight edgers do not appreciate the watch for its functionality, but rather for its constant capacity to safely signify subcultural membership as people age and change amidst continually changing fashion cycles.

In short, different consumers prefer quiet versus loud branding because they want to associate themselves with and/or dissociate themselves from different groups of consumers (Han et al. 2010: 16). This watch is a classic example of a subculture and the subculturalist aging together. The ability to take it on and off is very self-reflecting, one must contemplate the cue with each choice, and furthermore the fragility of a jewelry item and the exclusive and hard-to-obtain nature of this piece can almost serve as metaphors of sXe as a lifestyle.

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- Sarah, April 16, 2018
- Rich, April 17, 2018
- Everett, April 17, 2018
- Jacob, April 18, 2018

- Kyla, August 12, 2019
- Sarah, August 4, 2019
- Julia, August 9, 2019
- La Tisha, August 8, 2019
- Joe, August 18, 2019
- Carol, August 11, 2019
- Evan, August 3, 2019
- Nancy, August 12, 2019
- Julie, August 3, 2019
- Samuel, August 3, 2019
- Harjit, August 3, 2019
- Del, August 3, 2019
- Dan, August 9, 2019
- Marike, August 4, 2019
- Mike, August 4, 2019
- Sam, August 8, 2019

ⁱ Letter jacket or letterman jackets are associated with athletic attire generally at the high school or college level. They are typically a solid color wool body with leather sleeves in a secondary color, both colors associated with the school. Historically they have been worn in the United States to signify that an athlete has achieved performance and commitment goals and this is marked by an oversized alphabetical letter representing the institution sewn onto the torso. The style became popular as a garment worn by those in the straight edge community.