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ALTERNATIVE SUBCULTURES: “FREEDOM OF SAFE SELF-EXPRESSION IN AN OTHERWISE OPPRESSIVE AND JUDGMENTAL SOCIETY”

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Publication Date

2024-07-24

ALTERNATIVE SUBCULTURES: “FREEDOM OF SAFE SELF-EXPRESSION IN AN
OTHERWISE OPPRESSIVE AND JUDGMENTAL SOCIETY”

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

May 10, 2024

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT

Alternative subcultures are characterized by being outside mainstream society, with members having similar music preferences, appearances, and values. The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of emerging adults who identify with alternative subcultures (e.g., goth, emo, punk, etc). The sample included 83 participants from three groups: 1) self-identified alternative social media users, 2) self-identified alternative undergraduate students, and 3) undergraduate students who did not identify with alternative subcultures. Participants completed an online survey containing open-ended questions about subcultural identity and mental health measures for depressive and anxious symptoms, positive affect, and negative affect. Results revealed higher levels of depressive symptoms in both alternative groups compared to the non-alternative group, and higher levels of negative affect in the social media alternative group compared to the non-alternative group. There were no significant group differences for levels of anxious symptoms or positive affect. Qualitative findings revealed that self-expression and authenticity are subcultural values and that distinct music taste and appearance are indicators of subcultural identity. Although friends and family often introduce today's emerging adults to subcultures, they mainly learn about the pressing issues within the alternative community through social media. This topic remains widely unexplored, and future studies should examine why today's self-identified alternative emerging adults may report higher levels of depressive symptoms and negative affect. One possible reason is that society continues to hold mostly negative perceptions of subcultures. This research is important for providing services to promote well-being for individuals who identify with alternative subcultures.

Keywords: alternative subcultures, emerging adults, mental health

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank University of California, Riverside University Honors for the opportunity to complete a capstone project and the faculties' assistance with how to get started on this project. I am grateful for Dr. Aerika Loyd and Dr. Elizabeth Davis for being my faculty mentors in guiding me through my first research project. Their willingness to meet with me to discuss my progress and instructions on how to use SPSS, Qualtrics, and SONA taught me valuable research skills and greatly contributed to the completion of this project. Lastly, I would like to thank the participants for completing my survey and providing insightful information in understanding this research field.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2017, eighteen year old Anastasia White got called out of class and into the principal's office at Laurel Highlands High School in Pennsylvania for one reason – her gothic appearance. According to administration staff, her style was too “scary” and “distracting” to other students, resulting in parents calling to complain. Being the only goth at the school, White endured bullying to the point where she quit high school for two years. In a now-deleted Facebook post, White explained that she was following dress code and that the school encouraged immature kids to bully and discriminate against those who strayed from the “norm” (Dickman, 2017). This is just one example of how youth who identify with alternative subcultures are mistreated and misunderstood.

Subcultures are broadly defined as “social groups organized around shared interests and practices” (Herzog et al., 1999, para. 1). Definitions of alternative subcultures vary. For example, one definition is “a discernible group that is characterised by a strong sense of collective identity and a set of group-specific values and tastes that typically centre on distinctive style/clothing, make-up, body art and music preferences. Those involved usually stand out in the sense that their distinctiveness is discernible both to fellow participants and to those outside the group. Groups that typically place themselves under the umbrella of ‘alternative’ include goths, emos, punks, metallers and some variants of hippie and dance culture” (Greater Manchester Police, 2017). According to this organization, crimes against members of alternative subcultures are categorized as hate crimes. Garland et al. (2015) pointed out that “often what links many alternative subcultures is a strong sense of the shared experience of being ‘different’ and outside of the ‘norm’” (p. 1067). While there are many subcultures, in this study we define alternative subcultures as groups who have a specific subgenre of rock music associated with them (e.g.,

punk is associated with punk rock) or tend to listen to multiple subgenres of rock music (e.g., scene subculture typically listens to metalcore and pop-punk). Members of these alternative subcultures form a collective identity over shared music preferences, appearances, and values. We focus on these particular subcultures because previous news reports and studies have linked their adherents to being targets of violence (Garland, 2010) and/or having poor mental health (Young et al., 2014).

While alternative subcultures come and go, the 2020s have marked a huge revival of 2000s band comebacks and a new generation of musicians. The video-sharing app TikTok popularized e-kid subculture during the late 2010s (Jennings, 2019), though the pandemic may have contributed to the alternative revival in multiple ways: 1) increased feelings of isolation, which may have led more people to seek music with emotional lyrics, and therefore possibly a subculture that values expressing their emotions (George, 2021), 2) nostalgic parallels between the pandemic and 2000s teenagers' lifestyles (George, 2021), and 3) increased social media use to look for a new style as a form of escapism from the uncertain and despair reality the pandemic created (Bateman, 2022). Another possible explanation for the resurgence of alternative subcultures is increased diversity in race, gender, and sexual orientation of alternative and rock musicians. This diversity may have stemmed from Americanization and more acceptance of breaking social norms. A third possibility is the blurring between mainstream and alternative media. Recent years have marked a transition from cable television and radio to streaming services such as Netflix and Spotify. With a greater variety of shows, movies, and music on streaming services than tv shows on during prime time or songs on the radio, there is more room for exploration. Streaming services also provide access to less popular content through recommending similar content based on user's watching or listening habits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What Draws People to Alternative Subcultures?

Alternative subcultures are set apart from mainstream culture through non-conformist values and distinctive music and fashion preferences (Prinstein et al., 2002). For instance, emo subculture appeals to some men because it allows them to express their emotions and challenge gender norms (Fatallah, 2020). Alternative fashion may shock others by standing out from mainstream fashion, allowing similar individuals to find each other (Bogt et al., 2020), while avoiding contact with the rest of society. Fatallah (2020) suggests that world events such as 9/11 and wars may contribute to increased negative emotions that draw people to alternative subcultures due to distrust of the government or bitterness towards society. People may also seek alternative music because of its themes of self-harm, misery, etc. resonate with them (Bogt et al., 2020). Thus, many adherents of alternative subcultures share similar values and outlooks towards life. Music's ability to unite members of alternative subcultures goes beyond merely listening on one's own time. In a study by Darchen, Browning, and Willsted (2023), researchers found that the punk scene was rooted in political activism and tended to unite people through live music. Although people who identify with alternative subcultures are a social minority, they ultimately seem to enjoy the company of like-minded peers, but do not have much contact with the rest of society.

How Does Society Perceive Alternative Subcultures?

Society has pinned negative stereotypes on alternative subcultures, resulting in people who identify with alternative subcultures being victims of severe crimes and everyday verbal harassment. For instance, a pivotal court case was the 2007 murder of Sophie Lancaster, a young woman in England, who was murdered solely because of her gothic appearance. The judge ruled

her killing as a hate crime, sparking Greater Manchester to be the first police department to include crimes against alternative subculture adherents as a category of hate crime (Garland & Hodkinson, 2014). Despite this protection of alternative subcultures, other countries did not follow suit.

Garland and Hodkinson (2014) continued researching harassment and victimization of members of alternative subcultures in the United Kingdom, particularly of goths, interviewing young to middle aged adherents. All interviewees had adverse experiences due to their alternative appearance ranging from being labeled as a “freak” to one participant having to take an ambulance and waking up in a neck brace after a beating. Harassment occurred most commonly in public parks, on public transport, and places where drinking was often involved. Although not much research has been published during the 2020s about the relationship between alternative subcultures and mental health, a handful of studies were conducted during the 2000s and 2010s, many of which expressed concerns about the correlation between identifying with alternative subcultures and increased rates of poor mental health (e.g., depression).

The Relationship Between Alternative Subculture Identification and Mental Health

In contrast to society’s mostly negative view on alternative subcultures, conflicting views of mental health within alternative subcultures have been found in previous studies interviewing members of these subcultures. Seganti and Smahel (2011) interviewed participants who identified with emo subculture, finding mixed results about the relationship between emo subculture and suicide. While this study expressed concerns about some online conversations, participants stated that social media helped users find “real” friends who understood them. Other studies found more compelling evidence about the negative mental health effects of alternative subcultures including 1) high levels of anxiety and upper-normal levels of depression (Munteanu

et al., 2011), 2) higher levels of depression and self-harm in goths than non-goths (Bowes et al., 2015; Bogt, 2020), 3) higher levels of non-suicidal self-injury than other social groups (Young et al., 2014), 4) higher levels of risky behavior that could lead to poor mental health than other peer groups (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002), and 5) emo subculture normalizing self-harm (Kuska, 2017; Zdanow & Wright, 2012). However, other research suggested different findings. Till et al. (2015) found no correlation between rock, punk, and heavy metal with suicidality or other poor mental health indicators, whereas Scott and Chur-Hansen (2008) found a positive impact on emo subculture educating teens about mental illness. Nevertheless, several answered questions remain: Does listening to and interacting with fellow fans of alternative, rock, and mental music contribute to poor mental health or are youth with poor mental health more likely to identify with alternative subcultures? Much of this research was conducted before the pandemic, leaving questions unanswered. For instance, people's lifestyles drastically changed when stay-at-home orders were enforced and students were cut off from in-person contact. Perhaps the transition to online learning in 2020 and the slow transition back to in-person classes the following years impacted students' identity, mental health, and peer relationships.

CURRENT STUDY

Understanding the changes within alternative subcultures over the past few decades, this study seeks to examine the experiences of present-day alternative emerging adults in regards to exclusion, discrimination, and victimization within and outside of alternative subcultures. Much of the prior literature (e.g., Bogt et al., 2020; Bowes et al., 2015; Munteanu et al., 2011) focused on adolescents and was published before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the age gap between adolescents (younger than age 18) and emerging adults (approximately ages 18 to 24) is relatively small, the experiences of emerging adults are vastly different because many more live

away from home and/or transition from high school to college. The pandemic may have drawn more people to alternative subcultures due to feelings of loneliness and acknowledging the darker parts of life. Social media may have also brought people to alternative subcultures as a way to connect without in-person contact, in which people may feel more confident to act or dress alternatively online more than in-person.

Another gap in literature this study addresses is obtaining a diverse sample. Some previous studies stated to be composed of majority White participants in European countries (e.g., Kuska et al., 2017; Garland & Hodkinson, 2014). Many of these European countries used in previous studies (e.g. Italy, Germany) are not as racially diverse as the United States, so although the ethnicities of participants of some studies were unstated (e.g., Seganti & Smahel, 2011; Young et al., 2014), they were likely mostly White European. Prinstein and La Greca (2002) recruited a racially diverse sample (including 45.5% White, 37.0% Hispanic American, 13.0% African American, and 4.5% Asian American/Other; p. 330), but differed from this study because they interviewed multiple peer groups and combined non-conformists (alternative youth) and burnouts into one category for analysis. Diversity in previous studies was also lacking in gender and underexplored in sexual orientation. For example, Arunrangsiwed and Sawangdee (2020) conducted a longitudinal study that addressed LGBTQ+ and emo subculture identity prejudices, yet all of their participants either identified as male or female and data on sexual orientation was not collected. Since not much research about the relationship between alternative emerging adults and mental health has been published during or post-pandemic, this study seeks to examine any changes that have occurred and can potentially reduce negative stereotypes against members of alternative subcultures.

The main research question is: What are the experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and victimization of diverse young adults who identify with alternative subcultures, and how do these subcultures provide a sense of belonging and support? Additional research questions are: (1) How do today's emerging adults who identify with alternative subcultures define these subcultures, and what attracted them to alternative subcultures?, (2) How do today's emerging adults who identify with alternative subcultures think others within and outside of alternative subcultures perceive them?, and (3) What types of mental health support and sense of belonging do alternative subcultures provide?

I hypothesized that alternative subcultures would mainly be defined by music taste, with fashion and nonconformity also playing important roles. With the popularity of social media, I expected today's emerging adults would most likely hear about alternative subcultures on Instagram and TikTok. Due to alternative music and fashion becoming slightly more mainstream in recent years, I hypothesized that alternative subcultures would still be perceived negatively overall, but I thought there would be varying responses such as alternative subcultures being inclusive or radical to challenging gender norms or promoting mental health awareness.

METHOD

Pilot Study

Before study data were collected, Dr. Loyd and I conducted a pilot study. Three graduate students in our research lab completed the survey and no issues were found with the survey. Therefore, the survey completed by the graduate students was the exact same as the survey participants completed.

Participants

The final sample included 83 participants, 75 of whom were recruited from a large public university and 8 of whom were recruited from social media. Ages ranged from 18 to 41 (*mean* = 19.98, *SD* = 3.11). Participants self-identified with the following genders: 52.3% female, 30.2% male, and 16.3% other (e.g., non-binary, transgender). One participant did not provide this information. The following sexual orientation frequencies were self-reported: 58.1% heterosexual, 19.8% bisexual, 9.3% asexual, and 11.7% other. Two participants left this question blank. Race/ethnicity was self-reported with the following frequencies: 33.7% Asian, 23.3% Latinx, 17.4% Multiracial, 11.6% White, 8.1% Arab, 2.3% Black, and 2.3% Other. Data was missing for one participant. All participants were from the United States. Most participants were from California with other participant zip codes being from New Jersey (1), New York (2), Florida (1), Ohio (1), Illinois (2), Oklahoma (1), and Arizona (1).

Out of the participants who identified with alternative subcultures, the following subculture frequencies were self-reported: 22.1% identified with more than one subculture, 8.1% hipster, 5.8% emo, 4.7% e-kid, 4.7% grunge, 2.3% goth, 2.3% punk, and 1.2% metalhead. The rest of the participants identified as “alternative” but did not specify which subculture(s) they identified with. Participants were excluded for the following reasons: 1) inconclusive or conflicting data about whether or not they identified with alternative subcultures related to rock music, 2) duplicate responses from the same participant, 3) no information was provided besides demographics, 4) they were graduate students who were part of the pilot study, or 5) they were underage. In the final sample, participants were split into three groups: 1) a social media group who identified with alternative subcultures (8 participants), 2) a university group who identified with alternative subcultures (59 participants), and 3) a university group who did not identify with alternative subcultures for comparison (16 participants).

Procedures

Our goal was to recruit 100 participants from a large public university and approximately 20 participants from social media. Recognizing that university-recruited participants will receive research credit for their responses, obtaining 100 participants was beneficial to ensure that at least a good number of participants will provide thorough survey responses. Ten time slots were open to undergraduate students enrolled in psychology summer 2023 courses. All ten time slots were signed up for, but two students did not complete the survey. Thus, the sample size of the summer 2023 data collection was eight participants. Ninety time slots were available to undergraduate students enrolled in psychology fall 2023 courses. All 90 time slots were taken. The target age was emerging adults ages 18-24, though some participants from both the SONA and social media samples were older. However, their data were kept for analysis if Dr. Loyd and I determined their responses were relevant for the research questions. Any participant who was fluent in English was eligible, regardless of what location (zip code) they were from. Given that 18 is the minimum age for participants to consent, all participants were at least 18 years old. Another criteria for participants was that they must identify with at least one alternative subculture or broadly with the term “alternative” in relation to rock music-based subcultures. No race, gender, or sexual orientation criteria was inputted, though participants were asked to provide these demographics. University participants were recruited via SONA, a research participation system, in which university students complete studies of their choosing to receive course credit.

Social media users were recruited from a flyer that was shared on Dr. Loyd’s Twitter account and her lab’s Instagram account. Thus, it is possible that some university participants were recruited from social media instead of SONA. I shared the flyer on Instagram to

organizations that specialize in alternative subcultures, so that it could be shared through snowball sampling in order to obtain enough participants. After a lack of responses from Instagram, the study flyer was posted on Reddit. Not all the Reddit communities I messaged approved of me posting it, though the grunge, punk, and scene communities gave me permission. However, the flyer was taken down from the grunge and punk Reddit communities because of disrespectful comments. The scene Reddit community was more respectful, and therefore, the study remained posted. Based on comments on my post, at least two participants from the social media sample were recruited from the Reddit scene community. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information (e.g., student ID number, names) was removed from the data spreadsheet. No identifying information was required from social media users. They were only asked their zip code to get a general idea of their location to compare the university sample to the social media sample. We removed all participants' names from published quotes to protect anonymity.

This study used a mixed method design of open-ended and Likert scale questions. The survey was estimated to be completed between 30-60 minutes, though most participants finished in under 30 minutes. A consent form was provided at the beginning of the survey, a midsurvey resources form was provided after the open-ended questions, and a debriefing form was provided at the end of the survey. While the only physical risk involved was potential mild eye strain from completing the survey online, there were psychological risks due to questions related to depression and anxiety. Information about mental health resources within and outside of the university were provided midway through and at the end of the survey for participants in case any psychological harm occurred.

Measures

Qualitative Data

Participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions in the online survey. Each question with response themes and representative quotes are reported in Appendix A. Three main categories of questions were asked about identity, sense of belonging, and mental health. Identity was assessed using open ended questions about one's experiences with alternative subcultures. As representations of alternative subcultures have been presented more in popular media (e.g., *Wednesday* on Netflix), this study was interested in how alternative subculture adherents described subcultures and how they thought others perceived them. According to Bogt et al. (2020), music was the center of goth subculture. Bogt et al. (2020) found that preference for goth music predicted problem behaviors. By asking participants about identity, this study aimed to answer whether music was still the core of alternative identity, or if fashion had replaced it. This study also sought to understand the relationship between identification with alternative subcultures and mental health. Past studies pointed out differences in how alternatives described themselves versus how the wider society described them. One example comes from Seganti and Smahel (2011), in which 12 out of 23 participants who identified with emo subculture defined emo as an emotional condition rather than a choice to join this subculture. This definition contrasts with an anti-emo forum that claimed emos were "depressed and paranoid" (Seganti & Smahel, 2011). Recognizing this contrast of definitions, this study sought to gain insights on alternative subculture adherents' perceptions of their ingroup as well as how they thought members of mainstream culture viewed them. Sense of belonging was measured in free response questions within and outside of alternative subcultures assessing exclusion, discrimination, and victimization. Past studies expressed concerns with people who identified with alternative subcultures being victimized for their appearance (Garland, 2010). By hearing participants'

experiences online and in-person, a bigger picture of treatment within and outside of alternative subcultures was examined to reveal if prejudices still exist.

Quantitative Data

Depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961), consisting of 21 items. Participants reported their levels of depressive symptoms on a scale of 0-3 of where they best identified on that scale. Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the current sample was 0.92.

Anxious symptoms. Anxious symptoms were measured using the Beck Anxiety Inventory (Beck et al., 1988), consisting of 21 items. Participants reported their levels of anxious symptoms on a scale of 0-3 corresponding with "Not at all", "Mildly, but it didn't bother me much", "Moderately - it wasn't pleasant at times", and "Severely - it bothered me a lot" respectively. Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the current sample was 0.95.

Positive and Negative Affect

Positive and negative affect. Positive and negative affect were measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). This scale consists of 20 items, all of which are emotions. Participants reported their levels of how much they felt each emotion in the past week on a scale from 1-5 with 0 being "Very slightly or not at all" and 5 being "Extremely". Cronbach's alpha was 0.93 for positive affect and 0.90 for negative affect, respectively.

Mental health was measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). All items from the BDI, BAI, and PANAS were displayed on separate pages of the survey for each scale. Item 9 was removed from the BDI due to sensitive content.

RESULTS

Responses from the qualitative data about alternative subcultural identity revealed the following recurring themes across different subcultures or the alternative community as a whole: self-expression and authenticity as core values, preference for rock music, bold fashion choices, inclusivity, and mostly negative perceptions by society. Some of the responses were question specific, while others were prevalent across multiple questions. One response under the theme of self-expression described the alternative community as “Freedom of safe self expression in an otherwise oppressive and judgmental society.” Music and fashion being indicators of identification with alternative subcultures were expressed in the following statements: “I think the subculture identity is born out of the music, since that's what best expresses the emotions of alternative artists.” and “The alternative subculture's identity is heavily associated with the color black as the topic of an alternative is associated with a darker, much deeper color than the typical white counterpart.”

Inclusivity was mentioned in responses such as “...the alternative community encompasses a range of many other cultures such as goth, punk, metal, and more. Identity, fashion, and artistic expression are completely free willed.”, which references how there can be a wide range of subcultures that fall under the umbrella of “alternative” that value free-will. Despite the alternative community promoting self-expression and inclusion, most responses about society’s perceptions towards the alternative were negative. For example, participants stated that the alternative community is perceived as “High school dropout, bad kids, no morals, no future” and “People think it [the alternative community] is a strange thing and people within the alternative community are always told to be ‘normal’.”

In addition, there were some aspects of identity and perceptions that were more subculture specific. Political activism and anti-consumerism were mentioned mostly when describing punk or grunge subculture. For example, one participant shared, “I would say that the core belief of the grunge culture is the anti-authoritarian, anti-corporatism sentiments.” Darkness was used mainly to describe goth, metalhead, and emo subcultures. For example, one response with this theme was, “The metalhead community specifically is not perceived quite well by outsiders due to gruesome and sometimes satanic imagery as well as violent/aggressive sounding music that isn’t necessarily particularly accessible to others. Both of these aren’t actually very representative of what the actual members of the metalhead subculture are like.”

Mental health and mental illness, whether as subcultural values or as negative perceptions by others, were mentioned with one positive response being “I’d say the alt community takes particular concern with mental health accessibility and awareness” and one response of a negative stereotype being “Society tends to think that people who are alternative struggle with severe mental health issues, causing them to wear the clothes and makeup they wear, and ‘act’ the way they act.” Social media appeared as the primary way pressing issues are heard about in the alternative community, with TikTok being mentioned multiple times as being tied to e-kid subculture. One participant recalled that they joined the alternative community, “Around 2020 during the pandemic when alt-tiktok was becoming more popular. I joined because I thought it was a very accepting community that had a more online presence that I could connect with.”

There were no significant qualitative differences in how self-identified alternative and non-alternative emerging adults described subculture identity and perceptions. Thus, mostly negative perceptions were believed to be prevalent among those within and outside of the alternative community. On the positive side, multiple participants indicated that negative

stereotypes about alternative subcultures have decreased compared to previous decades, but still not significantly enough for alternative subculture adherents to feel understood by mainstream society. For example, one participant stated “I think the alt-community tends to be viewed as the weirdos though in the past three decades being weird has become more accepted...Overall, though the public has been a little more accepting of alternative communities, their view is still harmful and in a bad light.”

To address the remaining questions, descriptives for the quantitative mental health measures are reported in Tables 1 and 2. A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the levels of depressive symptoms, anxious symptoms, positive affect, and negative affect of the three groups: social media alternative group, university alternative group, and non-alternative group. For depressive symptoms, a one-way ANOVA revealed that scores varied significantly between groups [$F(2, 82) = 6.38, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14$]. Bonferroni follow-up comparisons revealed that these differences were that non-alternative group ($M = 5.13, SD = 5.92$) had lower depressive symptoms than either the social media alternative group ($M = 17.75, SD = 8.53$) or the university alternative group ($M = 13.17, SD = 10.06$), $p < .01$, but the two alternative groups did not differ. A one-way ANOVA also showed an omnibus difference in negative affect [$F(2, 82) = 6.01, p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$], such that scores varied significantly between groups. A Bonferroni multiple comparisons test revealed these differences, such that the non-alternative group ($M = 16.94, SD = 6.69$) had significantly lower rates of negative affect than the social media alternative group ($M = 27.50, SD = 5.10$) and the university alternative group ($M = 22.93, SD = 8.10$). No significant results were found between group rates of anxiety symptoms and positive affect.

DISCUSSION

The ultimate goal of this study was to understand the experiences of today's emerging adults who identified with alternative subcultures. Qualitative questions assessed entry into alternative subcultures, core values and components of identity, and perceptions of alternative subcultures. Quantitative questions examined levels of depressive symptoms, anxious symptoms, positive affect, and negative affect.

This study sought to highlight the experiences of exclusion, victimization, and discrimination of emerging adults who identified with alternative subcultures, and how subcultures can provide a sense of belonging and support. Mostly positive results were found about sense of belonging as indicated by participants' sentiments about inclusion in the alternative community. This study included diverse participants in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation, which is a good indicator that the alternative community has become increasingly more diverse, in contrast to previous studies that focused mostly on White Europeans (e.g., Kuska et al., 2017; Garland & Hodkinson, 2014). For instance, some responses to qualitative questions mentioned alternative subcultures being more welcoming to the LGBTQ+ community than mainstream society. Despite some progress, some participants reported issues with racism, sexism, and fatphobia in the alternative community, along with gatekeeping towards those who are new to the alternative community. Ultimately, while alternative subcultures are relatively inclusive and are open to mental health conversations, it is unclear whether or not individuals' mental health improved when they joined the alternative community.

This study also was interested in how emerging adults defined "alternative subcultures" and what attracted them to subcultures. In understanding how alternative subcultures are defined,

this study found that music taste is the main indicator of alternative identity, which was consistent with previous studies (Bogt et al., 2020), though bold appearances such as dark clothing, colored hair, tattoos, and piercings are also common identifiers. Holding more liberal political values and having a do-it-yourself attitude in terms of authenticity and anticonsumerism also appeared to be important at least to some subcultures. Due to these values, the alternative community is attractive to some individuals with the help of friends, family, and social media introducing them to subcultures. Although unclear from open-ended responses, appearance may be an important part of identity and community to help alternative emerging adults find each other because shyness was mentioned as a common personality trait among this population.

Another question explored was how mainstream society perceives the alternative community. Mainstream society appeared less inclusive to the alternative community with mostly negative perceptions being stated by both participants who identified with subcultures and those who did not, indicating that stereotypes about alternative subcultures being strange, cringy, delinquent, and macabre are still present and consistent with disparaging remarks from previous studies (e.g., Garland & Hodkinson, 2014) despite today's emerging adults learning about subcultures mainly through social media platforms such as TikTok instead of through news. This is important since social media caters to a younger demographic, so despite society thinking that younger generations are more accepting, there are still issues with bullying and teasing youth who identify with alternative subcultures. On a positive note, no extreme cases of physical violence (e.g., punching, kicking) against alternative emerging adults were reported in the current study, suggesting possible improvement since studies from the 2010s (e.g., Garland et al., 2015).

The final topic addressed was how alternative subcultures provide mental health support and a sense of belonging. Despite mostly favorable results about inclusivity, participants having friends who also identified with subcultures, and mental health conversations within alternative subcultures, results revealed some concerning mental health challenges in youth who identified with alternative subcultures in comparison to levels of those who did not identify with subcultures. These findings were consistent with studies conducted prior to the pandemic (e.g., Prinstein & La Greca, 2002; Munteanu et al., 2011), demonstrating that even with alternative subcultures becoming more mainstream through social media, poor mental health remains an issue. Some participants' responses indicated that mental health conversation was a value of alternative subcultures, although it was unknown whether or not mental health conversation was a protective factor in reducing depressive symptoms and negative affect.

Future studies can explore more positives of the alternative community such as how it may have sparked mental health conversation (Scott & Chur-Hansen, 2008) and challenged gender norms (e.g. males can express emotions) (Fathallah, 2020). By exploring these topics, negative perceptions towards the alternative community will hopefully be reduced. One suggestion to address poor mental health in the alternative community is the creation of a mental health organization specifically for alternative youth for access to culturally sensitive care. Besides advancing research related to subcultures, this study is relevant to understanding the importance of peer support and sense of belonging in finding a common identity.

How Can Colleges Address Negative Perceptions of the Alternative Community?

One question that future studies can ask is: How can colleges provide more inclusive environments and reduce implicit biases against members of the alternative community? Whether explicit or implicit biases against the alternative community exist, college is a critical

time of education in which students prepare for the real world. This preparation includes working with students of different backgrounds such as students from different ethnic, socioeconomic, and peer groups. Hawkins, Camp, and Schunke (2022) found that education on implicit biases is beneficial in promoting awareness of biases and sparking social change. Implicit bias tests presented students with “good” and “bad” words with racially black and white faces, in which students had to sort by being told which race corresponds to which words. Along with the implicit bias test, participants reviewed definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, watched two online lectures taught by professors of different races, and reviewed a summary of the lectures. Although this study focused on racial biases, similar measures can be taken to reduce biases against peer groups (e.g. nerds are socially awkward, jocks underperform academically, people who identify with alternative subcultures are suicidal).

One person’s view towards another is often shaped by whether the other person is perceived as an in-group or out-group member. Studies show that people are more likely to help someone who they identify with (a member of one’s in-group) as opposed to someone who they do not associate themselves with (a member of one’s out-group). The mere exposure effect is also used to improve one’s liking towards something. The idea is that people are more fond of stimuli that they are exposed to repeatedly. For example, in a study by Forbes, Stark, Hopkins, and Fireman (2019), researchers examined inclusivity using an online simulation where one member was considered excluded. Players passed a ball around and the simulation measured how many times the participant passed the ball to the excluded player. From this study and previous studies, results have consistently shown that bystander intervention increases inclusion, meaning that one tends to include the excluded player more when others do not. In real life, inclusivity should be promoted such as through team building activities and group projects. These activities will

provide opportunities for individuals from different peer groups to work together to achieve a common goal. This benefits the alternative community by being more inclusive to individuals who identify with subcultures rather than excluding them based on their appearance or negative stereotypes.

Beyond College: How to Address Poor Mental Health Within the Alternative Community

For individuals in the alternative community who are experiencing poor mental health, creative solutions are one suggestion for them to express their emotions in healthy ways. One possible solution is art therapy. From a punk perspective, Drass (2016) wrote about how four values of punk culture shaped her approach towards art therapy: (1) disestablishment of hierarchy, (2) achieving authenticity and understanding, (3) deconstruction and reconstruction, and (4) empowerment through a DIY mentality. Emphasizing the importance of individuality and resilience to instill hope within oneself while fostering a community, the basis of art therapy is often rooted in punk culture. In her studio, Drass explains how patients have the opportunity to create something meaningful to their healing and mental health. Although not all patients consider themselves artists or may be hesitant about expressing themselves, Drass stated “My roots in punk values lead me to encourage patients to experience new thresholds in a safe and supportive way” (p. 141).

Another approach towards self-expression as a means to promote positive mental health is music. Farr (2023) explored how punk music can be a means of expressing one’s sentiments towards psychological treatment. Punk arose as a genre of music for people to share their anger and experiences with drug use, mental illness, family violence, etc., making it a potential form of group therapy. The participants in this case study were from a psychotherapy group from Lane County Behavioral Health (LCBH) clinic. During their group sessions, they talked about their

experiences of past treatments, took notes on their conversations and turned them into punk songs. Those who did not play instruments or sing could participate by songwriting. This group demonstrated how punk music brings empowerment and community to people who struggle with mental illness and poverty.

Future research needs to address poor mental health within the alternative community. For mental health practitioners, this can be through providing more culturally sensitive care by matching alternative emerging adults with professional support who identify with subcultures or at least listen to similar music if a client indicates on a get-to-know-you questionnaire that alternative subcultures are a core part of their identity. Government authorities in the United States should also protect the alternative community by ruling crimes against subculture members as “hate crimes” or at minimum, workplaces and schools should not exclude means of self-expression such as colored hair, tattoos, and piercings unless piercings present a safety hazard. By having more inclusive dress codes, appearance choices that tend to be more common among subcultures will hopefully be more accepted by mainstream society.

Limitations

While this study advances our understanding of individuals’ experiences with alternative subcultures, there are some limitations worth noting. Most participants in this study attended a large public university in Southern California , and therefore, findings may not be generalizable to alternative subcultures worldwide or even within the United States. Although the social media sample included participants from other states, the limited number of 1-2 participants per state does not provide much insight into the experiences of emerging adults who identify with alternative subcultures from that state. Another limitation is that data were cross-sectional. Future studies can take a longitudinal approach to better understand whether or not mental health

levels worsen when individuals join the alternative community or if individuals who join the alternative community already experience mental health challenges.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the alternative community tends to be more inclusive than mainstream society, possibly due to its values of self-expression and authenticity, yet emerging adults who identify with subcultures may struggle with their mental health. Society should implement the aforementioned strategies and test out other approaches to reduce negative stereotypes towards the alternative community, which as a result, will hopefully lower levels of depressive symptoms and negative affect in alternative emerging adults.

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Table 1.

Descriptives of Mental Health Levels

<u>Variable</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>
Depressive Symptoms	83	12.060	9.880	.000	35.000
Anxious Symptoms	83	15.518	13.249	.000	59.000
Positive Affect	83	27.421	9.618	10.000	50.000
Negative Affect	83	22.217	8.082	10.000	41.000

Table 2.*Descriptives of Mental Health Levels Between Groups*

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Social Media Alternative</u> (n = 8)	<u>University Alternative</u> (n = 59)	<u>Non-alternative</u> (n = 16)
Depressive Symptoms	17.750 (8.531)^a	13.170 (10.059)^a	5.125 (9.880)^b
Anxious Symptoms	20.000 (13.918)	16.322 (13.516)	10.313 (10.989)
Positive Affect	23.750 (8.648)	26.559 (9.298)	32.438 (9.980)
Negative Affect	27.500 (5.099)^a	22.932 (8.098)^a	16.938 (6.688)^b

Notes: Values on the left in each square represent means. Values on the right in the parentheses represent standard deviations. Bolded values indicate that a significant between-group difference was found; letters indicate groups that are different from one another.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Question 1: When and why did you join the alternative community?

- Grew up around alt music/influenced by family
 - “I think when I was around 7, around 2011, I heard From First to Last on my dad's iPod. I really enjoyed the songs, and I began listening to other bands my dad listened to when he was younger...”
- Influenced by friends (often during teen years)
 - “I joined the alternative community in the summer of 2018 going into eighth grade because I saw many of my friends also join the alternative community.”
- Felt alt subcultures resonated with them
 - “Around my teen years because it felt like a place that I could belong, when I normally feel like an outcast. I also appreciated the style and music associated.”
- During the pandemic
 - Over social media (e.g., TikTok)
 - “Around 2020 during the pandemic when alt-tiktok was becoming more popular. I joined because I thought it was a very accepting community that had a more online presence that I could connect with.”
 - Coping
 - “During quarantine I grew an interest in egirl makeup and fashion and it was a hobby to cope with the isolation during the pandemic.”

Question 2: What do you think are the core beliefs/values of the alternative community?

- Inclusivity

- “I believe one core value is that every individual is valued and has a place in this community.”
- Self-expression
 - “Freedom of safe self expression in an otherwise oppressive and judgmental society.”
- Authenticity
 - “Really be yourself without influence from the public or popular media. Stay true.”
- Political activism
 - “I would say that the core belief of the grunge culture is the anti-authoritarian, anti-corporatism sentiments.”
- Anti-consumerism
 - “Not giving into modern fashion. Which is why we created our own fashion.”

Question 3: What defines the alternative subculture identity (e.g., clothes, hairstyles, music, etc)?

- Music: rock, alternative, indie, aggressive, loud
 - “Music such as alternative/indie bands is a huge part of the alternative subculture identity.”
 - “I think the subculture identity is born out of the music, since that's what best expresses the emotions of alternative artists. The music is pretty characteristic to each subculture, which evokes different feelings among the people listening to it.”
- Appearance: piercings, colored hair, dark colors, tattoos, DIY fashion

- “The alternative subculture's identity is heavily associated with the color black as the topic of an alternative is associated with a darker, much deeper color than the typical white counterpart.”
- “Alternative subculture means not wanting to buy into fast fashion and finding clothes that are repurposed.”
- Uniqueness
 - “There is no definition because each member is different and unique.”

Question 4: What are the pressing issues that are important for the alternative community?

Where do you learn about those issues (e.g., social media, searching online, clubs, etc.)?

- Mainly learn about issues through social media
 - “Mostly Instagram and TikTok.”
- Political and social justice
 - “Black rights, queer rights, social change. I interact with advocates for these issues to learn more.”
- Mental health
 - “I'd say the alt community takes particular concern with mental health accessibility and awareness.”
- Bullying
 - “Social media shows a lot of bullying of the alternative community and in general people may treat them differently.”
- Negative perceptions of alt subcultures by outsiders
 - “A major issue that the alternative community faces is prejudice and slander from mainstream society.”

Question 5: Do you consider the alternative community to be inclusive? Why or why not?

- Mostly inclusive
 - “Extremely, the alternative community encompasses a range of many other cultures such as goth, punk, metal, and more. Identity, fashion, and artistic expression are completely free willed.”
- Problems with gatekeeping
 - “Gatekeeping is a prominent issue that I would wager is performed by a vocal minority, but a minority nonetheless.”
- Discrimination based on appearance (e.g., skin color, size)
 - “I do to an extent. Like many communities, there are issues that can slip under the radar such as racism, sexism, fatphobia, etc.”

Question 6: How do you think the alternative community is perceived by others (e.g., popular media, society, etc.)?

- Bullied/ridiculed
 - “Mostly with disgust, hate and violence. I can assure you all alts were bullied all through school. But even as an adult I have been subject to verbal threats and stalking.”
 - “I think people tend to clown on the community whether it be for how they dress or how they act.”
- Rebellious
 - “High school dropout, bad kids, no morals, no future.”
- Strange

- “It is perceived as strange and weird. People think it is a strange thing and people within the alternative community are always told to be ‘normal’.”
- Dark/scary
 - “The metalhead community specifically is not perceived quite well by outsiders due to gruesome and sometimes satanic imagery as well as violent/aggressive sounding music that isn’t necessarily particularly accessible to others. Both of these aren’t actually very representative of what the actual members of the metalhead subculture are like.”
- Slightly more accepted than in previous decades
 - “I think the alt-community tends to be viewed as the weirdos though in the past three decades being weird has become more accepted...Overall, though the public has been a little more accepting of alternative communities, their view is still harmful and in a bad light.”
- Liberal
 - “We are seen as a bunch of radical leftists who want to infect the republicans with our gay ideologies when in reality we just want equality for every marginalized group.”
- Attention seeking/fake
 - “The alt community is perceived as a bunch of weird emo kids who fake mental illness.”
 - “I think some people may see the alternative community as too much and attention seekers.”
- Experience mental health challenges

- “Society tends to think that people who are alternative struggle with severe mental health issues, causing them to wear the clothes and makeup they wear, and "act" the way they act. I have seen tik toks of someone alternative presenting being stereotyped in their comments as unhappy with themselves or depressed.”

APPENDIX B: CONSIDERATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

Given that this study is focused on rock music-based alternative subcultures, recruiting participants who identified with these subcultures was a struggle for multiple reasons 1) some university participants provided vague or blank responses, likely completing the study for credit rather than from a passion to further research, 2) there was a limited number of organizations that specialized in alternative subcultures, 3) there was a limited number of participants who identified with alternative subcultures within the targeted age range, and 4) some participants identified as “alternative”, but not in relation to rock music-based subcultures. Limitations with participants to consider were 1) the majority of participants attended one college (university) and 2) the social media sample was smaller than what would have been ideal. Since this study was interviewing people, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was required to begin conducting research. IRB approval was given in Spring 2023 and data collection took place from Summer - Fall 2023. CITI training was also mandatory for working with human subjects, and was completed prior to data collection.

The role of Dr. Aerika Loyd, my primary faculty mentor, was to assist me through the research process. Her background in developmental psychology, particularly in adolescence and emerging adulthood was helpful in knowing what data collecting methods were useful for this age group. She and I met every week or two to check in on my progress and provide suggestions. Since she had more experience than me in conducting research, she helped spread word of this study on Twitter and Instagram. She also had experience in submitting research proposals to the IRB, and worked with me to draft our IRB application. My secondary faculty mentor, Dr. Elizabeth Davis, specializes in psychology related to emotions. She helped me with the mental health survey portion of my project by providing me with copies of the PANAS, Beck

Depression Inventory, and Beck Anxiety Inventory. Both Dr. Loyd and Dr. Davis signed my faculty mentor contract.

While this study intended on educating about the importance of alternative subcultures providing a sense of belonging and support to emerging adults, there is room for more research. Rather than broadly using the term “alternative” to encompass adherents of subcultures related to subgenres of rock music, future studies can focus more on specific subcultures. However, this study chose to use the term “alternative”, due to similarities across rock music-based subcultures and considering that many people do not identify with one subculture in particular. Also, this study only measured mental health in terms of positive and negative affect, depression, and anxiety. Further research can examine topics such as self-harm and suicide, which were both concerns found in previous research. Given time constraints and additional approval to conduct research on more sensitive topics, this study did not assess either of these mental health measures. Additional research can take into account generational differences. Most research has been conducted on younger populations, due to subcultures being more prevalent amongst teens and emerging adults. However, people who grew up with alternative subcultures in the early days of social media are now in their thirties. Follow up studies to compare mental health of alternative teens during the 2000s versus their mental health now would be interesting to examine long term impacts of identifying with alternative subcultures.

APPENDIX C: PROJECT TIMELINE

Winter 2023

- Work on abstract (all winter)
- Develop proposal/research question and hypotheses (all winter)
- Start IRB (started Week 9)
- Present in HNPG150 (Tue 3/14)

Spring 2023

- Submit first draft of IRB (by Week 10)
- Develop survey questions and scales (March-April)
 - Find existing scales to measure mental health levels
 - Acquire from Dr. Davis
 - Write original open-ended questions about inclusion/exclusion, sense of belonging, and support within and outside of the alternative community
- Create flyer for online sample (May-June)
 - Use Canva or other digital platform
- Write consent form for the beginning of the study (April-May)
- Write debriefing form for the end of the study (April-May)

Summer 2023

- Start rounding up literature review (all summer)
- Revise IRB first draft and resubmit IRB form (June-August)
- Start data collection (August)
 - Post study on university SONA for data collection

Fall 2023

- Continue rounding up literature review (all fall)
- Finish data collection (September-November)
- Post flyer on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter for data collection (September)

Winter 2024

- Analyze data (January)
 - Key findings
 - Differences among participants across demographics
 - Create figures to represent findings
- Write results (February)
- Apply to present in Undergraduate Research & Creativity Symposium (March)
- Start preparation for presentation (March)

Spring 2024

- Finish writing first draft (Week 3)
 - First draft of sections:
 - Abstract
 - Intro/Background
 - Methods
 - Results
 - Discussion
 - Conclusion
- Put items together in second draft (Weeks 4-5)
- Submit final project (Week 6)
- Finish preparation for presentation (March-May)

- Present in Undergraduate Research & Creativity Symposium (May)

Ongoing Responsibilities

- Meet with faculty mentor (every 1-2 weeks)
- Check for new literature (every 1-2 weeks)

Author Biography

Angie Louie is a fourth year psychology major at UC Riverside. She is volunteering in Dr. Aerika Loyd's Youth Health and Development Lab with coding and visual communications. Dr. Loyd and Dr. Davis mentored Angie through this paper as a part of the university's Honors Program. As founder of UC Riverside's alternative subcultures club, Angie has reached out to the local community to highlight the positives of subcultures and will continue her passion with researching alternative subcultures at graduate school.