



Band Merch, Silencing, and Aesthetic Community

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a question that has sparked heated debate while mostly flying under the philosophical radar: should people stop wearing the merchandise ('merch') of bands they do not listen to? I respond affirmatively. People should stop wearing merch of bands they do not listen to because (1) doing so can silence people who wear band merch to communicate their taste in music and (2) this silencing threatens the valuable role that wearing band merch plays in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music: promoting aesthetic community among them. As will emerge throughout the paper, this argument is relevant to the debate on silencing as well as the debate on the value of aesthetic community.

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Many strongly feel that one should wear band merchandise ('merch') only if one listens to the band or artist featured on the merchandise. Do a quick online search and you will find a barrage of articles, blog posts, online discussions, and YouTube videos decrying those who do otherwise. You can even buy a T-shirt that boldly states 'STOP WEARING T-SHIRTS OF BANDS YOU DON'T LISTEN TO' from multiple online retailers.¹ Yet, however widespread such reactions may be, they appear misguided from a normative perspective. After all, it is eminently plausible that people have a *prima facie* right to wear whatever they please, even if we disagree with their choices.² This dissonance raises the following question: are those who complain on to something, or should they move past their grievances?

In this paper, I will argue that, despite initial appearances to the contrary, people should indeed stop wearing the merch of bands they do not listen to.³ They should do so because wearing band merch without listening to the corresponding music is apt to negatively affect the aesthetic lives⁴ of people who share a taste in music: starting from the observation that many people – call them listening-wearers – wear band merch to communicate their taste in music, I will first examine the mechanisms underlying this mode of communication (Section II). Building on this foundation, I will argue that the collective behaviour of people who wear band merch without listening to the respective music – call them non-listening-wearers – can silence listening-wearers (Section III). Next, drawing on recent work by Nick Riggle, I will argue that this silencing threatens the valuable role that wearing band merch plays in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music: promoting aesthetic community among them (Section IV).⁵ Lastly, I will address several objections (Section V) and conclude with a brief summary and outlook (Section VI).

To be clear, when I say 'non-listening-wearers', I mean people who intentionally wear band merch despite not listening to the respective music at all and having no interest in the band or its fans. Hence, my argument to the effect that people should stop

1 In what follows, I will assume that people are primarily concerned with wearing band merch publicly – as part of their everyday outfits.

2 I say '*prima facie*' here because I want to allow for this right to be outweighed. For instance, I take it to be outweighed in cases where wearing some garment would be deeply morally offensive – such as wearing a Nazi uniform in the streets. For related discussion, see James O. Young, 'Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 135–46; C. Thi Nguyen and Matt Strohl, 'Cultural Appropriation and the Intimacy of Groups', *Philosophical Studies* 17 (2019): 981–1002.

3 I take this claim to be restricted by the *ought implies can principle*: people should abstain from wearing merch of bands they do not listen to only if they are in a position to refrain from such behaviour, that is, only if their circumstances are such that viable alternatives are at their disposal. For instance, if one's economic situation forces one to buy T-shirts at a thrift store and the only ones on offer are band shirts of bands one does not listen to, then there is no sense in which one should abstain from buying and wearing these band shirts. For the sake of simplicity, I will gloss over this complication.

4 Following Dominic McIver Lopes, Bence Nanay, and Nick Riggle, *Aesthetic Life and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 2, I understand our aesthetic lives as the sum of the 'aesthetic decisions, reactions, feelings, and actions' we respectively make, have, feel and perform 'every day', for example the way we choose to dress in the morning, how we respond to a song on the radio, or that feeling we get from watching a sad movie or our attending a gallery opening together.

5 I do not claim this is the only reason why non-listening-wearers should stop wearing merch of bands they do not listen to. Everything I will say is compatible with there being further reasons to this effect.

wearing merch of bands they do not listen to does not extend to those who do so through non-culpable ignorance. And it does not extend to those who exhibit some respect for the tradition of wearing band merch to showcase one's musical taste – for example, by occasionally listening to the music in question and showing basic interest in the band and its fans.⁶

After outlining my argumentation and clarifying how I understand 'non-listening-wearer', let me say a few words on what this paper is not about, to avoid a possible misunderstanding. If you expand your online search on band merch a little, you will quickly come across discussions of how men often randomly pester women they see wearing band merch, challenging them to name band members, songs, or albums.⁷ The argument I will make does not hand ammunition to those who engage in such conduct. After all, it only aims to identify a normative reason for why, generally speaking, people should stop wearing merch of bands they do not listen to. As such, my argument provides no rationale for picking out certain people based on their perceived identity and submitting them to special scrutiny concerning their fan credentials.

Though the issue has received scant philosophical attention,⁸ I believe exploring the 'ethics' of band merch-wearing is worthwhile for several reasons. For one, we are dealing with a contentious real-life phenomenon of a puzzling nature. As indicated, many people passionately hold that one should not wear band merch unless one listens to the corresponding music, and it is not antecedently clear whether – and if so, why – we should agree with them. In addition, developing the above argument will contribute to two philosophical debates – the debate on silencing and the debate on the value of aesthetic community. While the silencing debate has been predominantly concerned with linguistic communication, I will show, by way of example, how silencing can also occur with non-linguistic communication. Moreover, although several philosophers have recently made a strong case for the claim that aesthetic community is an important source of value for our aesthetic lives,⁹ the normative implications of this claim have so far been underexplored. This paper

6 See Nick Riggle, 'Wearing Band T-shirts of Bands You Don't Know', *Splintered Mind*, 30 June 2023, <https://schwitsplinters.blogspot.com/2023/03/wearing-band-t-shirts-of-bands-you-dont.html>; 'Wearing Band T-shirts of Bands You Don't Know', *Bloomsbury Contemporary Aesthetics Case Studies*, ed. Darren Hudson Hick, 2024, <https://www.bloomsburyphilosophylibrary.com/article?docid=b-9781350886445&docid=b-9781350886445-016>. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify what I mean by 'non-listening-wearer'. I will return to the casual listeners alluded to above in ftn. 32 and ftn. 46, indicating why I think the argument to be developed does not extend to them.

7 Such behaviour seems akin to what Fricker calls 'testimonial injustice', which 'occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word'; see Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1. While it is questionable to what extent we might classify wearing band merch as a form of testimony (at least in a strict sense), the above phenomenon seems relevantly similar to testimonial injustice: a plausible explanation for why some men specifically subject female band merch wearers to such quizzes is that, owing to some identity stereotype, they take it that women are less likely than men to listen to the respective music.

8 But see Riggle, 'Wearing Band T-shirts', *Splintered Mind*, and 'Wearing Band T-shirts', *Bloomsbury Contemporary Aesthetics Case Studies*, for an exception.

9 See, for example, C. Thi Nguyen, 'Trust and Sincerity in Art', *Ergo* 8 (2021): 21–53; Nick Riggle, 'Toward a Communitarian Theory of Aesthetic Value', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 80 (2022): 16–30; 'Convergence, Community, and Force in Aesthetic Discourse', *Ergo* 8 (2022): 615–57; 'Aesthetic Value and the Practice of Aesthetic Valuing', *Philosophical Review* 133 (2024): 113–49; Anthony Cross, 'Social Aesthetic Goods and Aesthetic Alienation', *Philosophers' Imprint* 24 (2024): 1–15.

makes progress in that direction. Assuming that what I will argue is plausible, the value of aesthetic community can give outsiders normative reasons not to interfere with these communities.¹⁰

II. LISTENING-WEARERS

It should be uncontroversial that many people wear band merch to visually communicate that they are fans of some band's music. They are what I have called 'listening-wearers': they pick and choose their band merch based on their musical tastes. And, when they publicly wear it, they do so, in part, to put said taste on display, wanting those who know the band to get the message. The aim of this section is to examine the mechanisms underlying listening-wearing so understood.

To see what enables listening-wearing, it will help to first contemplate a related phenomenon: *signalling* fandom through band merch.¹¹ Say you pick up a Misfits T-shirt at a flea market, not realizing it is a band shirt, and then wear it publicly. By wearing the Misfits T-shirt, you signal that you are a fan of their music to those who know the band. That is, people who know the band will tend to consciously or unconsciously infer that you are a fan of their music based on your T-shirt. However, it seems somewhat awkward to say you communicate that you are a fan of their music. After all, you do not know the band, do not realize that you are wearing a band shirt, and thus have no intention of informing people about your taste in music when you wear it.¹²

So, how come wearing band merch signals that one is a fan of a band's music to those who know the band? A promising way to answer that question is to appeal to the notion of 'social meaning'. Following Justin Khoo, I will, roughly speaking, understand 'the social meaning of *x* within a community [as] a cluster of shared (or overlapping) stereotypical beliefs members of that community take to be shared among them about *x*'.¹³ For the purpose of illustration, let us consider two examples. Sally Haslanger points out that, socially, 'pink *means* girl and blue *means* boy'.¹⁴ And Jason Stanley suggests that the social meaning of the word 'professor' is 'someone with

10 Riggle briefly suggests that, normatively speaking, we have more reason to opt for aesthetic practices that are especially prone to fostering aesthetic community compared to those that score lower here (see Riggle, 'Toward a Communitarian Theory', 24–25). However, he does not discuss to what extent the value of aesthetic community can be significant for normatively evaluating the behaviour of those who are not members of said community.

11 Following Mitchell Green, 'From Signaling and Expression to Conversation and Fiction', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 96 (2019): 295–315, I take signals to be non-factive and not require communicative intentions – thus they are captured neither by what Grice calls 'natural meaning' nor by what he calls 'nonnatural meaning'; see Paul Grice, 'Meaning', in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 213–23.

12 While I find it helpful here to differentiate between signalling and communicating in this way, one might also use 'signalling' and 'communicating' interchangeably and then distinguish between signalling/communicating non-intentionally and intentionally.

13 Justin Khoo, 'Code Words in Political Discourse', *Philosophical Topics* 45 (2017): 57. I say 'roughly speaking' because Khoo adds some qualifications to the above characterization of 'social meaning' (see *ibid.*). However, for our purposes, the simple characterization will suffice.

14 Sally Haslanger, 'Social Meaning and Philosophical Method', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 88 (2014): 25.

liberal political views, who is practically incompetent'.¹⁵ On Khoo's gloss, this amounts to saying that people in a given community believe, and take it that they share the belief, that pink is a girl's colour while blue is a boy's colour. And it amounts to saying that people in a given community believe, and take it that they share the belief, that professors typically endorse liberal political views and are practically incompetent.¹⁶

Given that all kinds of things can possess social meaning, including words, statuses, colours, food, clothes, accessories, money, actions, and behaviours,¹⁷ I will first try to make plausible that being a fan of the respective band's music is the social meaning of wearing band merch (or, at least, a prominent part thereof). I will then suggest that this allows us to explain why wearing band merch should signal that one is a fan of the band's music.

Let us begin by considering the history of band merch. Band shirts and band merch more broadly were first made DIY-style by members of different artists' fan clubs in the 1950s and started their rise to prominence during the 1960s and 1970s, when it became common practice to sell official merch to fans at concerts.¹⁸ Since band merch arose out of the practices surrounding fandom, and since it has retained a close association with fandom, it seems plausible that a belief to the effect that someone who wears band merch is typically a fan of the band's music is widely shared by people within a given society. Moreover, it seems plausible that such a belief is not only widely shared by people but also that these people take this belief to be widely shared among them. Hence, it seems plausible that the social meaning of band merch-wearing (or a prominent part thereof) is being a fan of the band's music.

Assuming this is correct, we can now straightforwardly explain why wearing band merch should tend to signal to those who know the band that one is a fan of the band's music. Put differently, we can now straightforwardly explain why people who know the band in question should tend to infer from someone wearing band merch that said person is a fan of the band's music.¹⁹ Again, consider the Misfits example. Given that people believe, and take it that people share the belief, that someone who wears a band shirt is typically a fan of the band's music, people who know the band will tend to infer that someone they see wearing a Misfits T-shirt is a Misfits fan.²⁰

So far, I have focused on explaining why wearing band merch signals fandom – irrespective of the wearers' intentions. This now allows us to see what enables listening-wearing. Listening-wearers are somewhat aware of the social meaning of band merch-wearing (though they would probably not use that term). They explicitly or implicitly believe and believe that many people in their society share the belief that

15 Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 169.

16 Using Stanley's example, Khoo ('Code Words', 57) points out that a word's social meaning should not be equated with its linguistic meaning. After all, it seems perfectly coherent to describe someone as a right-wing professor.

17 Haslanger, 'Social Meaning', 25.

18 Monica Sklar and Mary K. Donahue, 'From Punk to Poser: T-shirts, Authenticity, Postmodernism, and the Fashion Cycle', in *Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock*, ed. George McKay and Gina Arnold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–21.

19 However, as I will discuss in the next section, there are significant and theoretically interesting exceptions to this.

20 For related discussion concerning how the social meaning of words can trigger inferences in listeners, see Khoo, 'Code Words', 57.

people who wear band merch are typically fans of the respective music. And when they put on their preferred band merch and wear it in public they are relying on and being guided by this social meaning, trusting that those who know the band will get the message.

This description might suggest a unilateral relation between the social meaning of band merch-wearing and the wearers' intentions. But, of course, that would be an oversimplification. The social meaning of band merch-wearing and the wearers' intentions seem interconnected in, at least, the following ways. Wearers' intentions play a crucial role in establishing the social meaning of band merch-wearing in the first place. As band merch was initially made by fans and later marketed to them, fans wore it, in part, to communicate their fandom, thus helping to establish the social meaning of band merch-wearing. Second, once that social meaning was crystallized enough, people could comfortably rely on it to communicate their taste in music. They could wear band merch for their communicative purposes – confident that people would get the message (see above). Third, by wearing band merch to communicate their taste in music, people help perpetuate and reinforce the social meaning of band merch-wearing.

In this section, I have examined the mechanisms underlying signalling and communication through band merch. Next, I will argue that people who wear band merch without listening to the respective music – non-listening-wearers – can collectively silence those who use band merch to communicate their taste in music.

III. NON-LISTENING-WEARERS

The philosophical debate on silencing started in the 1990s with Rae Langton, drawing on Catharine MacKinnon, arguing that pornography can silence women regarding their ability to refuse sex.²¹ However, since then, it has expanded beyond discussions of pornography.²² Moreover, while discussions of silencing have often focused on how members of disadvantaged groups can be frustrated in their communicative attempts, several authors have recently argued that the characterization of silencing itself should leave open who gets silenced.²³ In what follows, I will assume an understanding of silencing that is neutral on this score, taking it that 'someone is *silenced* in the respect, and to the degree, that they face some obstacle to communicating what they would like to communicate'.²⁴ Although the debate on silencing has broadened since the 1990s concerning the cases considered as well as who might be affected by silencing, the debate is still predominantly about linguistic communication (see

21 Rae Langton, 'Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 293–330.

22 For example, Ishani Maitra, 'Silencing Speech', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39 (2009): 309–38; Samia Hesni, 'Illocutionary Frustration', *Mind* 127 (2018): 947–76; Ethan Nowak, 'Language Loss and Illocutionary Silencing', *Mind* 129 (2020): 831–65; Laura Caponetto, 'A Comprehensive Definition of Illocutionary Silencing', *Topoi* 40 (2021): 191–202; Mark Schroeder, 'Attributive Silencing', in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 12, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 170–92.

23 This is, of course, compatible with cases where members of disadvantaged groups are silenced being paradigmatic and especially problematic. See Caponetto, 'Comprehensive Definition'; Schroeder, 'Attributive Silencing', 172; Maitra, 'Silencing Speech'.

24 Schroeder, 'Attributive Silencing', 171–72.

Section I).²⁵ Here is where I hope to make a contribution. In this section, I show, by way of example, how silencing can also occur with non-linguistic communication.

To do so, let us begin by asking how non-listening-wearers might collectively pose an obstacle to listening-wearers communicating fandom through band merch and thus silence the latter. To answer this question, it will help to consider a technique, identified by Lawrence Lessig, that institutions sometimes use to intentionally regulate the social meaning of some *X* – *ambiguation*:

With this technique, the architect [for example, some institution] tries to give the particular act, the meaning of which is to be regulated, a second meaning as well, one that acts to undermine the [...] effects of the first. [...], ambiguation is about establishing that *X* is like *Y* or *Z*. It simply adds a link without denying an existing link, and thereby blurs just what it is that *X* is.²⁶

If some *X* has social meaning *Y* in a given community, then this roughly means that people in this community believe, and believe that people share the belief, that *X* means *Y*. Thanks to this, people who are aware of the social meaning of *X* will tend to infer from an instantiation of *X* that this instantiation means *Y*. However, if an additional link *Z* becomes part of the social meaning of *X*, then this undermines an instantiation of *X* triggering the inference that this instantiation means *Y*. That is, people aware of the extended social meaning of *X* will not be able to straightforwardly infer from an instantiation of *X* whether this instantiation means *Y* or *Z*. Moreover, if, over time, *Z* becomes the dominant social meaning of *X*, then people will tend to infer *Z* – rather than *Y* – from an instantiation of *X*.

While it seems wrong to call non-listening-wearers an institution or say that they intentionally try to regulate the social meaning of band merch-wearing, it nevertheless seems that their behaviour collectively has an ambiguation effect on the latter. To see this, it will help to consider a concrete example: the Ramones T-shirt with its iconic eagle and shield design. This T-shirt seems close to omnipresent. You can regularly spot it on the street, on Instagram, on style blogs, and so on. As Livia Boeschstein and Cláudia Pereira point out, the Ramones T-shirt is ‘currently among the most sold and famous in the world’.²⁷ Arturo Vega, its designer, estimates that this T-shirt vastly outsells the band’s albums, adding that it has become ‘a fashionable brand that is even used by people [...] that are completely unaware of the existence of the band’.²⁸ These observations lead Boeschstein and Pereira to the conclusion that ‘[t]he Ramones T-shirt can be interpreted as the social representation of what the mass culture or conventional mainstream society understand as rock and rock

25 The possibility of silencing in connection with non-linguistic communication is sometimes alluded to in passing (for example, Maitra, ‘Silencing Speech’, 324n23; Caponetto, ‘Comprehensive Definition’, 199n25). However, to my knowledge, there has been no detailed discussion of this phenomenon.

26 Lawrence Lessig, ‘The Regulation of Social Meaning’, *University of Chicago Law Review* 62 (1995): 1010.

27 Livia Boeschstein and Cláudia Pereira, ‘From CBGB to Forever 21: the Ramones T-shirt and It’s Representations on the Mainstream’, in *Keep It Simple, Make It Fast! An Approach to Underground Music Scenes*, vol. 3, ed. Paula Guerra and Tânia Moreira (Porto: University of Porto Press, 2017), 190.

28 Ibid., 191.

culture’.²⁹ In a series of interviews conducted on band shirts, one of the interviewees puts a consequence of this in no uncertain terms, remarking that people wearing said Ramones T-shirt is ‘a way to identify “posers”’.³⁰

We can assume that the original social meaning of wearing the Ramones T-shirt was being a fan of the Ramones’ music. Hence, wearing the Ramones T-shirt would signal that one is a fan of the Ramones’ music. That is, people aware of the band and the social meaning of band shirt-wearing would tend to infer from one’s wearing the Ramones T-shirt that one is a fan of their music. However, this changed over time when it became increasingly common and commonly known that many people wear the Ramones T-shirt who do not listen to their music. Owing to this, wearing the Ramones T-shirt acquired a second social meaning: something like seeking some association with rock and roll culture or portraying some generic rock and roll image. And this second social meaning interferes with the inference that wearing the Ramones T-shirt would have previously tended to trigger. People who now see someone wear said T-shirt cannot be sure what to infer from this – for example, are they a fan of the Ramones’ music or do they just want to portray some generic rock and roll image? Moreover, since the second social meaning has arguably become dominant, people will likely draw the second inference rather than the first one.³¹

This, of course, can pose a significant obstacle when it comes to wearing said T-shirt to communicate one’s taste in music. Say you want to do so. Because of the above ambiguation effect, people who know the band and are aware of the extended social meaning of wearing the Ramones T-shirt might not be able to determine why you wear it. Hence, they might abstain from drawing any related inference. Or they might infer that you wear the Ramones T-shirt not because you are a fan of their music but because you want to portray some generic rock and roll image. Some might even deem you a ‘poser’, as suggested by the above interviewee. In each case, you have been effectively silenced regarding your attempt to communicate fandom through band merch.

While I have used the Ramones as a concrete example to argue that, through their collective behaviour, non-listening-wearers can silence listening-wearers, nothing depends on this particular example. Instead, the phenomenon seems general in nature. Whenever it is common and commonly known that non-listening-wearers wear some band merch, this is bound to have an ambiguation effect on the social meaning of wearing said band merch – for example, does wearing it signify one’s taste in music or is it simply some fashion statement?³² And this ambiguation effect can, in turn, lead to the silencing of those who wear that band merch to communicate their taste in music. In fact, we arguably already find those dynamics with other popular bands, such as Run-D.M.C., Metallica, Wu-Tang Clan, and the Rolling Stones. Moreover, in principle, these dynamics also apply to bands whose iconography has so far seen less co-option from the mainstream. If, say, wearing merch of The Last Dinner Party

29 Ibid., 190.

30 Sklar and Donahue, ‘From Punk to Poser’, 11.

31 This seems especially true for members of younger generations. After all, the latter are arguably particularly aware that donning band merch is often more about showcasing one’s fashion acumen than one’s musical affiliations.

32 Note that this kind of ambiguation effect would likely not be brought about by the casual listeners alluded to in Section I. After all, the connection between wearing the merch and listening to the music is preserved with the latter.

were to become widely fashionable, then this would ambiguate the social meaning of wearing the respective merch, too. And this would then negatively impact their fans' ability to don this merch to communicate their fandom.

In addition, it seems reasonable to conjecture that there is an indirect ambiguation effect as well. When it is common and commonly known that non-listening-wearers wear some band merch, then this does not just directly ambiguate the social meaning of wearing that band merch. It also indirectly ambiguates the social meaning of band merch-wearing more generally. Given that it is common and commonly known that some band merch is worn by non-listening-wearers, people might wonder whether this is not also the case with other band merch – for example, is it not also often worn simply as some fashion statement? And this indirect ambiguation effect would arguably pose a more general obstacle to using band merch as a means to communicate fandom – independent of how popular one's preferred band merch currently is.

Let me stress, however, that what has been said so far is purely descriptive and thus insufficient to normatively ground the claim that people should stop wearing merch of bands they do not listen to (for short, the claim that non-listening-wearers should stop). More specifically, social meanings evolve and change all the time through our collective behaviour, and there is not necessarily anything problematic about this. Sometimes we might even welcome a change in social meaning.³³ Likewise, there is not necessarily anything problematic about people being silenced. As Ethan Nowak observes in connection with verbal communication, '[s]aying that some speech acts are undermined by some set of circumstances is not, in and of itself, to say why anyone should care'.³⁴ So, even given that non-listening-wearers collectively ambiguate the social meaning of wearing band merch and given that this can lead to listening-wearers being silenced, we still fall short of a normative reason why non-listening-wearers should stop.

Providing such a reason will be the objective of the next section. Combining what has been said with recent work by Riggle, I will argue that non-listening-wearers should stop because (1) wearing band merch plays a valuable role in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music and (2) this role is threatened when listening-wearers get silenced due to the ambiguation effect brought about by non-listening-wearers.

IV. AESTHETIC COMMUNITY

To develop this line of argument, we first need to answer two questions: what role does wearing band merch play in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music? And why should this role be valuable for these people's aesthetic lives? We find the seed of a promising answer to both questions in a recent blog post by Riggle. He writes: '[T]he aesthetic value of band t-shirts lies in the way they promote aesthetic community'.³⁵ Building on Riggle's remark, we can say that the role that wearing band merch plays in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music is promoting

33 Sally Haslanger, 'What Is a Social Practice?', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 82 (2018): 247.

34 Nowak, 'Language Loss', 852.

35 Riggle, 'Wearing Band T-shirts', *Splintered Mind*.

aesthetic community among them. Moreover, it is precisely this role that makes wearing band merch valuable for their aesthetic lives. Let's zoom in on these answers, starting with the first.

According to Riggle, '[t]wo or more people form an aesthetic community when and only when and because they are engaged in mutually supportive discretionary valuing practices'. For example, '[y]ou tell a joke, and I laugh; I read you my poem and you smile; we watch a film and riff on each other's interpretation of it; together we make music'.³⁶ To make plausible that wearing band merch promotes aesthetic community among people who share a taste in music in this sense, we best begin with some examples. Recently, I was at a philosophy conference, wearing a Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds T-shirt. Upon seeing it, one of the other speakers momentarily abandoned the conversation he was engaged in, pointed at my T-shirt, smiled brightly, and exclaimed 'Ah, Nick Cave'. A short but pleasant conversation about the artist and his music ensued. Pop culture writer Andy Mackk shares similar experiences: 'I often wear an MF Doom hat, and I'll get someone complimenting me on the hat every once in a while. [...] And every time someone has briefly chatted with me over the hat, it's like two people from a secret society embracing one another'.³⁷ This kind of experience is also related by sociologist William Ryan Force when reporting '[a] typical interaction from a night in the [punk] scene': 'I am at a show, wearing my Against Me! [...] pin. [...] This may spark a conversation in which someone who also listens to Against Me! will approach me and want to "talk shop"'.³⁸ If you wear band merch regularly, you can probably add your own stories. For, as Mackk puts it, 'when you see someone in public with something you're a fan of, you want to connect with them'.³⁹

The engagements taking place here straightforwardly satisfy Riggle's definition of an aesthetic community. When the people in question share a moment to talk about their common love for a certain band's music, they engage in a mutually supportive valuing practice. They express their love for the same music to each other and respond to the other's love for that music. Moreover, the mutually supportive valuing they engage in is discretionary in so far as neither party was in any sense obliged to become a fan of that music, and each did so without the other's influence. And crucially, in each example, an aesthetic community was formed only because one of its members first sartorially communicated their taste in music. Had I not put on my Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds T-shirt, then my fellow speaker would have had no idea that we are both Team Cave, so to speak. Consequently, he would not have made a remark and we would have missed the chance to connect over our shared taste in music. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for Mackk and Force. Extrapolating from

36 Riggle, 'Toward a Communitarian Theory', 26. One might worry that aesthetic communities, so understood, are rather rigid entities, imposing strict divisions between insiders and outsiders. However, they allow for a significant amount of dynamism upon closer inspection. They can start spontaneously, be short- or long-lived, static or fluent, closed-off or inviting. And, assuming our aesthetic interests are sufficiently broad, we can participate in many different aesthetic communities and sometimes even merge them. Moreover, the aesthetic communities we engage in might change over time, depending on how our aesthetic interests or surroundings develop. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to be explicit on this issue.)

37 Aaron Mackk, 'Is It Cool to Wear Band T-shirts You Don't Listen To?', *Medium*, 21 September 2021, <https://medium.com/the-riff/is-it-cool-to-wear-band-t-shirts-you-dont-listen-to-e00c9f5e1a62>.

38 William R. Force, 'Consumption Styles and the Fluid Complexity of Punk Authenticity', *Symbolic Interaction* 32 (2009): 295.

39 Mackk, 'Is It Cool to Wear Band T-shirts'.

these examples, it seems plausible that wearing band merch does promote aesthetic community among people who share a taste in music.

But why should wearing band merch play a valuable role in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music *because* it promotes aesthetic community among them? The answer I propose is straightforward: because aesthetic community contributes significantly to the value of aesthetic life itself. Riggle himself puts forward the view that ‘aesthetic community [...] is the highest [...] good of aesthetic life’⁴⁰ and suggests that ‘aesthetic life is worth living because it brings us *communal goods* that we cannot get without it’.⁴¹ While this view might appeal to some, it might strike others as overblown. However, even if one is reluctant to crown aesthetic community the highest good of aesthetic life, it seems plausible that aesthetic community deserves a place in the pantheon of things that make aesthetic life valuable. Participating in these communities – for example, by sharing a joke, watching and interpreting a movie together, reading poetry to each other, or, indeed, connecting over a shared love for some music – allows us to express and cultivate our distinctive aesthetic tastes, which empirical research suggests are material to our sense of self,⁴² to help others do the same, and to thereby feel a sense of belonging.⁴³ All these things, it seems safe to assume, make our lives as such richer, more joyful, and more meaningful than they would be otherwise.⁴⁴ I am not concerned with determining the precise value of aesthetic community here. My point is merely this: given that aesthetic community contributes to the value of aesthetic life itself and that wearing band merch promotes aesthetic community among people who share a taste in music, doing so plays a valuable role in their aesthetic lives.

One might worry, however, that the aesthetic communities occasioned by band merch-wearing are too shallow to contribute much to people’s aesthetic lives – for instance, the above examples only detail brief one-off encounters. I want to make two points in response. First, although these encounters might be brief one-off things, they need not be. They might grow into something bigger – for example, continued aesthetic exchanges, friendships, or collaborations. Second, even if the aesthetic communities remain fleeting affairs, this does not mean that the value they contribute to the respective people’s aesthetic lives is negligible. Randomly encountering and engaging with someone who loves the same music might considerably brighten up one’s day, leaving one with the comforting reassurance that one’s existence is less enclosed than it might sometimes seem, that one is connected to unknown others – even in one’s immediate vicinity – through shared sensibilities.⁴⁵

40 Riggle, ‘Toward a Communitarian Theory’, 27.

41 Ibid., 25.

42 See Jörg Fingerhut et al., ‘The Aesthetic Self: The Importance of Aesthetic Taste in Music and Art for Our Perceived Identity’, *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2021): 1–18. For further discussion of this study, see Felix Bräuer, ‘Aesthetic Testimony and Aesthetic Authenticity’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 63 (2023): 406–7.

43 Riggle, ‘Toward a Communitarian Theory’, 26.

44 Kubala argues that the value of aesthetic life cannot be traced back to one single source. Nevertheless, he suggests that ‘[t]he list of such sources would be unified because they all relate our engagement with the aesthetic domain to something about the good life’; see Robbie Kubala, ‘Aesthetic Practices and Normativity’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (2021): 422.

45 For related discussion, see Nguyen, ‘Trust and Sincerity’, 48–49.

After thus arguing that wearing band merch plays a valuable role in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music, we can now ask to what extent this role is threatened when listening-wearers get silenced as a result of the ambiguation effect brought about by non-listening-wearers. My answer has two parts. First, wearing band merch can lead to people forming aesthetic communities over a shared taste in music only if listening-wearers get approached by fellow fans. Second, when listening-wearers get silenced due to the ambiguation effect brought about by non-listening-wearers, this may well not happen. I take the first part to be uncontroversial. Imagine, for example, that the fellow speaker had not commented on my T-shirt. In this case, any related opportunity for us to riff on our shared love for the same music would have been lost. To make the second part plausible, let us revisit the Ramones example. Imagine you wear the Ramones T-shirt to communicate your fandom, and a fellow Ramones fan sees you wearing it. Moreover, let us stipulate that – owing to the ambiguation effect brought about by non-listening-wearers – they mentally file you as one of those ‘posers’ who wears the T-shirt only to portray some generic rock and roll image. In this case, they will probably just shoot you a dismissive glance rather than feel compelled to approach and connect with you. This, in turn, means that the two of you will not get a chance to form an aesthetic community over your shared taste in music.⁴⁶

Combining what has been said in this section provides us with the resources to normatively ground the claim that non-listening-wearers should stop: non-listening-wearers should stop because wearing band merch plays a valuable role in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music insofar as doing so promotes aesthetic community among them and because this valuable role is threatened by non-listening-wearers in the sense just indicated.⁴⁷ I consider this sufficient to normatively ground the claim that non-listening-wearers should stop, especially since said claim amounts to little more than: ‘Expand your musical horizon or pick another T-shirt off the shelf’. This concludes my positive argument. In the next section, I will address what I take to be the most pressing objections against it.

V. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

The first objection I want to address goes as follows. Normatively speaking, we can appropriately judge that non-listening-wearers should stop only if they do something morally wrong by virtue of wearing merch of bands they do not listen to. However,

46 Let me point out that the same arguably does not apply when the fan has you down as a casual listener (see Section I and fn. 32). Here, they might welcome the opportunity to deepen your appreciation for the music and convert you more fully to the tribe. Riggle (‘Wearing Band T-shirts’, *Splintered Mind*) also remarks that people wearing band shirts without listening to the respective music ‘is apt to produce confusion and missed connection’. However, his focus differs from mine. He considers a case where a Megadeth fan approaches someone wearing a Megadeth T-shirt only to be told they wear it just because they ‘like how it looks’. I take Riggle’s point to be that this response will probably dissuade the fan from further engaging with the other person and that the chance for aesthetic community therefore gets nipped in the bud. In contrast, my point is that, owing to non-listening-wearers, fellow fans might fail to recognize each other and that, because of this, the chance for aesthetic community does not so much as arise.

47 Note that it is crucial to my argument that the connection in question is valuable. Hence, it does not extend to cases where people, owing to their wearing behaviour, threaten connections that are not valuable or are even disvaluable. For related discussion, see Nick Riggle, *On Being Awesome: A Unified Theory of How Not to Suck* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 39–40; Julian Dodd, ‘Style Appropriation, Intimacy, and Expressiveness’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61 (2021): 373–86.

as pointed out in Section I, people have a prima facie right to wear whatever they please. This certainly includes the right to wear merch of bands they do not listen to – whatever else we might say about that practice. Ipso facto, non-listening-wearers do not do something morally wrong by virtue of wearing merch of bands they do not listen to. Therefore, normatively speaking, we cannot appropriately judge that non-listening-wearers should stop.

This objection hinges on the plausibility of the more general claim that – normatively speaking – we can appropriately judge that people should abstain from φ -ing only if they do something morally wrong by virtue of φ -ing. But this claim is implausibly strong. As Julia Driver points out, there are appropriate normative judgements ‘lying in the dark corners between right and wrong’.⁴⁸ In connection to this, Driver alerts us to acts, which she calls ‘suberogatory acts’, ‘that we ought not to do, but which are not forbidden (we do not have an obligation not to do them)’.⁴⁹ Put differently, there are acts that are not morally wrong but where – normatively speaking – we can nevertheless appropriately judge that people should abstain from performing them.⁵⁰ To take one of Driver’s examples, ‘the person on the train who refuses to take a less convenient seat – and thus greatly inconveniences [a couple he knows wishes to sit together] – has done something bad for which he can be blamed. But he has done nothing [morally] wrong’.⁵¹ Because the passenger has a right to his chosen seat, he does not do something morally wrong by virtue of refusing to give up it in favour of a less convenient seat. Nevertheless, because he greatly inconveniences the couple by virtue of doing so, we can appropriately judge that the passenger should not refuse to give up his seat and take another one instead.

Rejecting the aforementioned general claim opens up the possibility that, normatively speaking, we can appropriately judge that non-listening-wearers should stop, although they do nothing morally wrong by virtue of wearing merch of bands they do not listen to. Moreover, following Driver, issuing such a judgement would indeed be normatively appropriate if wearing band merch without listening to the corresponding music would constitute suberogatory behaviour. And, given what was argued in Sections III and IV, we have good reason to believe it does. Wearing the merch of bands one does not listen to constitutes suberogatory behaviour precisely because doing so threatens the valuable role that wearing band merch plays in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music – promoting aesthetic community among them.⁵²

Another line of objection would be that we should draw a different conclusion from the considerations presented in the last two sections. It is not that non-listening-wearers should stop. Instead, music fans should be bolder and more open-minded. Take the Ramones fan from the previous section. Even when they believe that one

48 Julia Driver, ‘The Suberogatory’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1992): 295.

49 Ibid., 291.

50 See *ibid.*, 286n2.

51 Ibid., 291; see also *ibid.*, 286–87.

52 I take it that an act can be more or less suberogatory, like an act can be more or less morally wrong (for example, murder vs. robbery). For instance, the passenger’s behaviour in the train case would be more or less suberogatory depending on whether it might cause physical harm (for example, preventing a visibly pregnant woman from sitting down) or merely inconvenience (for example, preventing a couple from sitting together, as in Driver’s example). Hence, in arguing that the behaviour of non-listening-wearers is suberogatory, I am not committed to claiming that it is deeply so. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to be clearer on this issue and for suggesting the pregnancy example.)

wears the Ramones T-shirt only to portray a rock and roll image, they should be bold enough to approach anyhow. As in your case, they might be wrong, and there might actually be a chance to connect over a shared love for the Ramones' music. And, even in cases where the fan finds out that the other person does not listen to the Ramones, they should be open-minded enough to still engage and try to forge some aesthetic connection with that person – maybe point the latter to an especially cherished Ramones song and inquire about their taste in music. Considering this kind of engagement, Riggle remarks that '[b]oldly opening up can create a bridge between worlds, and venturing into each other's different aesthetic worlds can both expand and refine our own'.⁵³

I agree that it would be good if music fans were to cultivate these attitudes and behave in this fashion. Yet I believe that requesting such boldness and open-mindedness is a bit too much to ask. Empirical research indicates that approaching strangers is a daunting task for many people: they believe that others will have no interest in talking to them or will probably not like them, or they are doubtful about their ability to initiate and carry on conversations – or all of the above.⁵⁴ Let's stipulate this holds for our Ramones fan. In this case, it seems unfair to request that they should simply be bold enough to approach you when they see you wear the Ramones T-shirt, given that they do not believe and lack any sufficiently strong reason to believe that the two of you are antecedently connected by the bond of fandom – a belief that would presumably lower the barrier for them. Moreover, put yourself in the shoes of a Ramones fan who approaches someone who wears the Ramones T-shirt and then learns that the other person wears it just for the look. They have jumped over a social barrier only to discover the other's cavalier attitude. Assuming the band and their music really mean something to the fan, it seems natural they would feel a bit annoyed, perhaps even ever so slightly hurt. Consequently, it seems overly demanding to request that this fan should be open-minded enough to adapt to the situation seamlessly and fumble for some aesthetic connection anyhow. While doing so would be admirable, we certainly cannot blame the fan for refusing to step up to the plate. Now, given that non-listening-wearers threaten the valuable role that wearing band merch plays in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music, and given that it seems too much to ask of the latter that they should counteract this threat in the above ways, the conclusion originally drawn still seems warranted.

Yet one might observe at this juncture that wearing band merch can play the same kind of valuable role in the aesthetic lives of people who share a sartorial taste; it can promote aesthetic community among them as well. And one might add that, for these people, said role is not necessarily undermined by non-listening-wearers. Say you are not a fan of the Ramones' music but you nevertheless like the design of the iconic Ramones T-shirt. Furthermore, imagine that you see someone wearing that T-shirt. The notion that the two of you share a sartorial taste might be enough

53 Riggle, 'Wearing Band T-shirts', *Splintered Mind*.

54 See, for example, Juliana Schroeder, Donald Lyons, and Nicholas Epley, 'Hello, Stranger? Pleasant Conversations Are Preceded by Concerns about Starting One', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 151 (2022): 1141–53; Erica J. Boothby et al., 'The Liking Gap in Conversations: Do People Like Us More than We Think?', *Psychological Science* 29 (2018): 1742–56; Gillian M. Sandstrom and Erica J. Boothby, 'Why Do People Avoid Talking to Strangers? A Mini Meta-analysis of Predicted Fears and Actual Experiences Talking to a Stranger', *Self and Identity* 20 (2021): 47–71; Gillian M. Sandstrom, Erica J. Boothby, and Gus Cooney, 'Talking to Strangers: A Week-Long Intervention Reduces Psychological Barriers to Social Connection', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 102 (2022): 1–12.

for you to overcome the social barrier separating strangers, to approach the other person, and compliment them on their clothing style – without caring whether it reflects their taste in music. And this person might respond in kind – again, without caring about your taste in music. Before you know it, you might be knees deep in a stimulating conversation where you riff on each other’s sartorial loves and pet peeves. Here, the two of you would be forming an aesthetic community over a shared sartorial taste. And, since you did not even care whether the other person was a Ramones fan when you paid the initial compliment, non-listening-wearers were not a threat to the two of you forming an aesthetic community. The worry here is this: given that non-listening-wearers threaten the valuable role that wearing band merch plays in people’s aesthetic lives *for some people only*, there is not – normatively speaking – sufficient reason for non-listening-wearers to stop.

I do not want to deny that wearing band merch can promote aesthetic community among people who share a taste in music and among people who share a sartorial taste. Still, there is a significant difference. Plausibly, the wearing of almost any item of clothing has the social meaning that one aesthetically endorses said item. Hence, people can wear almost any item of clothing to communicate their sartorial taste. Thanks to this, the wearing of almost any item of clothing can promote aesthetic community among people who share a sartorial taste. This, in turn, suggests that band merch is expandable here. In contrast, band merch is rather unique in that wearing it has the social meaning that one is a fan of the respective band’s music. Hence, people who want to sartorially communicate their taste in music are more or less dependent on band merch.⁵⁵ And this, in turn, suggests that wearing band merch plays quite an important role in promoting aesthetic community among people who share a taste in music. Given this difference, it seems that non-listening-wearers threatening the role of wearing band merch in promoting aesthetic community among people who share a taste in music is sufficient to normatively ground the claim that non-listening-wearers should stop.

However, the sufficiency worry might also come in another guise. One might point out that non-listening-wearers only threaten the forming of in-person aesthetic communities based on a shared taste in music, not the forming of those aesthetic communities online. After all, band merch does not seem to play a role for the latter. And one might further hold that such online aesthetic communities constitute equally good alternatives to their in-person counterparts. One might then think that, in light of such online alternatives, non-listening-wearers threatening the forming of the aforementioned in-person aesthetic communities is insufficient to normatively ground the claim that non-listening-wearers should stop.

The force of this worry turns on whether online aesthetic communities really do constitute equally good alternatives to in-person aesthetic communities. While one would have to be a Luddite to deny that online aesthetic communities can be a

55 One might point out that fans could eschew popular designs and hunt for arcane band merch instead or even get a band tattoo to communicate their taste in music. However, arcane band merch is often quite costly and difficult to find. It seems unfair to be settled with these burdens just to communicate your musical taste. And band tattoos seem an even less viable alternative here. While you can take off, say, a band shirt at the end of the day, the tattoo equivalent is relatively permanent; see Matej Cibik, ‘On the Immortality of Tattoos’, *Journal of Ethics* 24 (2020): 194. Moreover, both getting a tattoo and having it removed are expensive, time-consuming, and painful; see *ibid.*; Laura Sizer, ‘The Art of Tattoos’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60 (2020): 429. To show that you are a fan of some band’s music, you should not have to get their logo inked into your skin.

valuable part of one's aesthetic life, it still seems they fall somewhat short compared to their in-person counterparts. For one, there is a certain immediate pleasure in encountering someone in the flesh who shares one's love for some music (or some other aesthetic love, for that matter) and to riff on that love with them – for example, to directly experience the excitement on their face and in their gestures and let it spark your excitement in turn. And it seems that, at least for some, it is difficult to fully replicate this pleasure when, say, typing on a keyboard or during a Discord session.⁵⁶ Moreover, unlike in-person aesthetic communities, online aesthetic communities will often be between people separated by space and time zones. This distance will likely limit the kinds of engagements that might occur within or as a result of that aesthetic community – for example, attending concerts together, artistically collaborating, or developing real-life friendships. These considerations suggest the following: given that online aesthetic communities fall somewhat short compared to in-person aesthetic communities, it seems that the preceding considerations as to why non-listening-wearers should stop still carry sufficient normative force.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Wearing band merch signals that one is a fan of the respective band's music owing to the social meaning that band merch-wearing has acquired in our society. This allows people – whom I have called 'listening-wearers' – to use band merch to communicate their taste in music. However, when it becomes common and commonly known that others – whom I have called non-listening-wearers – wear band merch without listening to the respective music, this ambiguates the social meaning of band merch-wearing, which can silence listening-wearers. And, crucially, when listening-wearers get thus silenced, this threatens the valuable role that band merch-wearing plays in the aesthetic lives of people who share a taste in music: promoting aesthetic community among them. It is for this reason that non-listening-wearers should stop. More generally, by developing and defending this line of argument, I hope to have made plausible that aesthetic communities can be of normative import: given the value of aesthetic communities, outsiders can have normative reasons not to interfere with them.

Let me end by briefly addressing some broader implications of the argument I made. One might ask to what extent the considerations presented in this paper also apply to other kinds of fan merch, such as sports tricots. And one might ask to what extent these considerations apply to garments, hairstyles, or adornments specific to particular cultural groups. While I think that whether outsiders should abstain from co-opting such items can only be assessed on a case-by-case basis,⁵⁷ I nevertheless believe the preceding discussion offers some pointers for such an assessment. Extrapolating from what was said, I believe that, to reach a verdict in a given case, we need to consider at least the following questions:⁵⁸

56 Relatedly, Dotson points to 'research showing that digitally mediated communication, for some people, is too thin to support a psychological sense of social connection. Not everyone can experience social intimacy in online environments'; Taylor Dotson, *Technically Together: Reconstructing Community in a Networked World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 93.

57 See Nguyen and Strohl, 'Cultural Appropriation', 982.

58 For related discussion, see Dodd, 'Style Appropriation', 378–79, 381.

- To what extent does sporting the item in question help foster community?
- How valuable is the respective community?
- How much does the item's co-option impair its potential to foster community?
- Are there viable alternatives to said item?

Answering these questions will often be tricky. Still, we should be mindful of them when normatively evaluating others' style choices and choosing how we visually present ourselves to the world.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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