Youth transitions have dominated the youth research agenda for several decades, with a continuing focus on structural processes and institutional arrangements that shape and constrain young people’s holistic development, particularly in geographic locations characterised by conditions of social and economic disadvantage (Heath et al. 2009). More recently, there has been increasing interest in the ways in which young people’s identity work intersects and influences various social transitions within school, domestic and broader social contexts, and vice versa (Stokes & Wyn 2009). Despite the known social, economic and psychological constraints of marginalisation, young people still manage to find a space in which to express their identity and live a “life of one’s own”, yet not enough is known about the ways in which young people use cultural affiliations and lifestyle choices to express their identity and demonstrate personal agency in their social worlds (Miles 2000; Shildrick 2006).

This paper is based on data from current PhD research investigating the significance of heavy metal music and lifestyles for young people’s identity work and social transitions. For those unfamiliar with heavy metal scholarship, there has been a steady increase in robust metal studies in Australia and internationally with increasing interest in young people’s engagement with heavy metal lifestyles (Rowe 2011). Heavy metal music and lifestyles have long since fractured away from the stereotypical parent genre, which was traditionally associated with

**Piercings and passports**

*Exploring the social mobility of Adelaide’s metalcore ‘scene kids’*

As young people continue to confront transition issues such as school-to-work pathways, they are concomitantly developing their own social and cultural priorities and responding to them in new and innovative ways. This process warrants a greater focus on young people’s identity work as they navigate their transitions through increasingly fluid social and cultural environments. Drawing on her current PhD research, Paula Rowe focuses attention on Adelaide’s ‘scene kids’, a community of interest based on a subgenre of heavy metal music. She utilises Bauman’s (2000) liquid modernity thesis to parallel the social dynamics of ‘liquid’ metal subgenres with those of the ‘liquid’ modern world. Exploring the social processes of scene kids highlights ways in which socioeconomic circumstances can affect young people’s level of engagement with lifestyle options. This in turn raises questions as to how “scene kid identities” might impact on other life pursuits and social transitions.
white, working-class males who typically adopted standard-issue uniforms of long hair, jeans, denim cut-off vests or leather jackets with sew-on band logo patches on the back, perhaps completed by leather, studded wrist bands and bullet belts (Weinstein 2000; Brown 2003).

Today, there is barely a mention of the term “heavy metal” among metal fans, unless it is used in a historical sense. Instead, contemporary metal preferences are more likely to be indicated in terms of subgenre affiliations, such as thrash metal, death metal, black metal, doom metal or metalcore. In fact, the boundaries around metal subgenres are being erected with such rapidity that preferences are now likely to be indicated with multiple suffixes and prefixes, such as tech/death/core, prog/doom/sludge metal or black/grind/death metal; the possibilities and combinations (of metal preferences, fashion styles and symbolic practices) are highly fluid and seemingly inexhaustible.¹

**Liquid society, liquid metal?**

The proliferation of individualised, “do it yourself” subgenre options now available to contemporary metal fans strongly reflects the broader social conditions and processes that impact on young people’s social transitions. In fact, Bauman’s (2000) metaphor of the “liquid” modern world can be borrowed and applied directly to the ongoing liquefaction of metal music and lifestyles. Elliott (2007, p.13) succinctly summarises the liquid modern thesis by suggesting that, for Bauman, modernity in the age of industrialisation was about solidifying fluid social things into a form of imagined permanence, whereas modernity in the age of liquid globalism represents an embracing of impermanence and flow in interhuman bonds.

“Heavy” modernity was more likely to produce a “cradle to the grave” identity proposition in terms of community bonds, employment, class and culture (Bauman 2000); just as “heavy” metal was once largely occupied by a more fixed and enduring community of shared tastes and identity work (Purcell 2003). “Liquid” modernity is now more likely to force individual identity projects, the “success” of which rests on the lightness and speed with which an individual is able to navigate prolific and fluid choices of selfhood (Bauman 2008). So too have liquefied metal lifestyles become transient rollercoaster rides through cross-pollinated styles, symbols, preferences, practices, meanings and multiple “metal” identities (Kahn-Harris 2007).

Bauman (2000) is quick to emphasise that liquid modernity’s promise of infinite options and opportunities for identity work does not come “cheap” – rather it is fraught with uncertainty, risk and fear of making the wrong choices. Furlong (2009, p.344) further cautions that forms of consciousness may indeed have changed, “but people’s locations within power structures still strongly impact on life chances”, even if people perceive they have increased opportunities and greater scope for individual agency. Given that heavy metal has gained prominence as an accessible, global youth culture (Kahn-Harris 2007), it seems timely to investigate how young people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds access and engage with metal lifestyles.

**The research**

This paper draws on current, qualitative doctoral research which is utilising a critical ethnographic approach to support attempts to first describe the experiences of “becoming” and “being” metal and, second, to consider how policymakers and service providers might usefully align with the interests of young people in order to facilitate empowered youth transitions.

Early findings presented here are drawn from stage one data collection. To date, 27 in-depth interviews have been completed with participants ranging in age from 18 to 23 (recruiting flyers called for young people aged 18–25 who identified with any or all metal subgenres). The subject matter of stage one interviews included “becoming metal” (first memories, introduction, reactions, push–pull factors); background and contextual information (family, school, community, peer networks); experiences of “being metal” (in various spheres of social life); post-school experiences and future aspirations. Although
broad and scoping in nature, topics have been discussed in considerable detail with many interviews lasting for several hours (at the insistence of participants who had much to say about their lifestyle preferences and subgenre affiliations).

Participants from a range of metal subgenres – and from diverse social and economic backgrounds – have been recruited from various geographic locations around Adelaide, South Australia. Recruiting flyers were placed in retail music stores in the metal section, at metal shows, metal apparel retail stores, rehearsal rooms, music stores (instruments and equipment), and posted online in metal forums.

Future reporting of findings will investigate multiple themes and issues around young people’s levels of engagement with a wide range of metal lifestyles and practices, and will examine the interplay between these lifestyle choices and social transitions. However, this paper makes no attempt to prematurely address issues of transition here, but does hope to encourage dialogue around the intersection of youth cultures and transitions prior to more detailed results and analyses being available.

The focus of the following discussion stems from a data subset that highlights a current phenomenon known in Adelaide as the “scene kid”. Interview quotes include gender, age and subgenre affiliation of interviewee (location is also provided where relevant to the text).

**Findings and discussion**

**What defines a ‘scene kid’?**

The metal subgenre most commonly associated with scene kids is metalcore, although it is fast morphing into deathcore. By the time of publication, it will most likely have an even newer name and fashion element, such is the parallel between the liquefaction of metal lifestyles and what Bauman (2000) says about liquid modern society – with consequences for identity work featuring deeply in the emergence of “newer” metal identities and subgenres.

While the use of the term “scene” has been the subject of spirited scholarly debate (see Hodkinson & Deicke 2007), and the term “scene kid” has often carried negative connotations when used by those outside the metalcore scene to describe those within the metalcore scene, the terms “scene” and “scene kid” are used throughout this paper in the manner used by participants themselves – as a catch-all for the metalcore scene and the young people engaged with it.

The common musical elements within metalcore are the growling, screaming vocal styles in the verses (often accompanied by “clean” vocal choruses), down-tuned guitar riffs and breakdowns, and blistering guitar solos layered around emotional lyrical content. The fashion elements of metalcore include distinctive hair styles (presently long, “swept” asymmetrical fringes), “skinny” fit jeans, tattoos (for those over 18 or those who can afford them) and multiple piercings (particularly “fleshies” or “stretches” which are the oversized holes in ear lobes):

You look at metalcore and obviously those guys are attractive to girls, and it is more about image than music. It’s easy to become a deathcore kid, cut your hair right, lose some weight, wear skinny pants, there you go you’re in, put a coke can through your ears. At normal metal gigs you can be a really ugly guy and you can be best friends with everyone, but if you go to a deathcore gig, you’d be pushed to the back, it’s a very gated community … (male, 18, thrash/death metal)

Scene kids are a different breed of metal altogether, they’re the metro-sexuals of metal I guess, just a few people who sort of run this scene and dictate the dress code at the time. There’s definitely fences going up, especially in the hardcore range of metal, which you can’t get through with just music, it is becoming absolutely more of a scene thing with like dress and the way you even talk and like everything … (male, 18, metalcore)

Whether from the metalcore scene or not, participants gave consistent descriptions of the physical characteristics, history, social practices and movements of scene kids. The point of difference was whether young people considered metalcore practices to be a good or a bad thing. For example, longstanding
Scene kids are frequently adopting a somewhat ‘soccer hooligan’ mentality in regard to violent practices in mosh pits.

Protocol at non-metalcore gigs (described by participants as “normal” metal gigs) dictates that if someone falls down in a mosh’ pit, then friends and strangers alike will move quickly to lift that person up and protect them from harm. This was an aspect of metal community and kinship that young people from other metal subgenres enjoyed and took pride in:

A lot of scene kids are exceedingly ignorant of traditional metal etiquette, the way you mosh, the way the crowd interacts … (male, 22, black/death/doom metal)

At Chimaira the guy in front went down and I jumped in and helped get him straight out so he didn’t get trampled, it’s just what you do, you don’t see a brother get hurt … (male, 21, nu/thrash/industrial metal)

Kahn-Harris (2007, p.44), drawing on Berger (1999), affirms that “moshers are careful to take care of other moshers”, and although moshing practices may appear violent to outsiders, they are in fact highly controlled activities. In stark contrast, it was reported that scene kids are frequently adopting a somewhat “soccer hooligan” mentality in regard to violent practices in mosh pits, whereby they “head hunt” people at the front of the mosh and target them with errant fists and elbows known as “helicopter” moves. Spin kicks in the style of martial arts are also a popular moshing style and have coined the term “pit ninja” for people who engage in this practice:

It’s so annoying man, you’ll be at the front getting into it and these people run up and punch people in the back of the head and they run back, it’s like calm down man, it’s all turning into like gangs and anger. People get into it like they do for violence in sport, I mean they don’t keep it in the pit, they try and kick back at people everywhere and it just ruins the whole thing. Metalcore is for people who wanna seem like they like metal, but it’s not metal, it’s something else … (male, 18, thrash/death metal)

People want people to be scared of them, they wanna go in the mosh and not be touched, so they go in like a gang, it’s almost like being in prison, you get a rep so you don’t get fucked up – and that’s the scene kids. The guys who are just into music, they don’t go out to fuck people up, but the scene kids go for a whole other reason … (female, 18, metal/deathcore)

In sum, scene kids are characterised by metalcore and deathcore musical preferences, a distinct fashion sense and increasingly violent moshing styles. The latter is significant in that it stands in stark opposition to the “respectful” and controlled moshing styles practiced at “normal” metal shows and highlights the fluid evolution of alternative metal community practices and group identity work of scene kids. In Adelaide, this is a concerning trend as scene kids are attending the live shows of different metal subgenres and inflicting their unrequited moshing styles on “non-scene kids”; however, it must be noted that increasing social interaction between subgenres appears to be largely due to the ways in which local Adelaide metal shows are being structured by promoters and venues, rather than a phenomenon instigated by scene kids.

Where are scene kids coming from and how do they enter the scene?
According to participants, the history of Adelaide’s scene kids can be traced to strands of straightedge culture, Christian hardcore, hardcore/punk and some elements of emo culture. Although scene kids can be found in multiple locations, the largest numbers, and indeed the originators of the “scene” have tended to come from affluent Adelaide Hills areas:

It was kids in the country who started the scene really, cos they used to come down to Adelaide and all stay down for the weekend, but they’d have nowhere to stay so they’d stay in the city at the Torrens… (male, 18, metalcore)

Parents around this area, it’s such a good neighbourhood they don’t think anything bad happens so they don’t really keep an eye on their kids – so we’d not come home for three to four days at a time and parents would assume we were at a friend’s house cos it’s such a good neighbourhood. A lot of the scene kids come from these areas, good schools, good parents, good area – they have money
It is not uncommon to talk to young people who have never been to the city, nor visited the beach.

from parents to go out, they get everything bought for them and they don’t have any responsibility … (female, 18, metalcore)

Interestingly, the next largest number of scene kids appear to come from Adelaide’s northern suburbs, an area plagued by persistent social and economic disadvantage. While the trends described here apply to greater Adelaide scene kids, the metalcore phenomenon and its cultural nuances are occurring worldwide (Hutcherson & Haenfler 2010). It is unknown if Adelaide’s demographic trends in metalcore participation are also occurring nationally and internationally, and, if so, to what extent.

The differences between socioeconomic characteristics of the northern suburbs and the Adelaide Hills suburbs are startling. Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of relative socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage in the greater Adelaide statistical local areas lists Playford (incorporating the northern suburbs) as the number one area of disadvantage, with Adelaide Hills listed as the second-ranked area of advantage (the number one area of advantage also borders this area) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008).

Why then, are these disparate regions producing the greatest numbers of scene kids? The data suggest scene participation is clearly meeting the needs of more affluent young people on some level, yet they have been somewhat guarded in their responses to date. Consequently, not enough is presently known about the more affluent scene kids and any attempts to discuss their motivations and rewards for scene involvement is premature. In contrast, the data raise interesting questions around the motivations and rewards experienced by scene kids from the northern suburbs, which also resonate with previous findings and information collected from forums conducted with young people in this region (Rowe & Savelsberg 2010; Loud Actions Youth Forum 2009).

Scene kids of the north

Previous research has highlighted the tremendous challenges faced by young people growing up in the northern suburbs of Adelaide as they navigate their way through conditions of deeply entrenched social and economic disadvantage (Rowe & Savelsberg 2010). Not surprisingly, for many years the northern suburbs were a fertile breeding ground for the stereotypical union of heavy metal and working-class youth. More recently, these “traditional” young metal fans have all but disappeared from the northern suburbs with scene kids emerging in droves to replace them:

_It’s very much ghetto out here, a lot of kids that came in and started buying stuff started getting into it (metalcore) cos everyone was doing it in town – out here, people were like, oh, that must be the new fad so they’d go and do it, it just picked up from there. I started here about four years ago and we never had any metalcore bands, all the kids who come in now, they only want what they’ve got in Adelaide … (metal apparel retail store worker, northern suburbs)

The scene is bigger here than anywhere else, it’s cos there’s nothing to do here for kids. I remember we had to make our own fun and we did some stupid things that we knew were gonna get us hurt, like Jackass stunts – cos there was nothing to do, nothing … (female, 18, metalcore, northern suburbs)

The scene kids mostly hang out in the city, every Friday night. They used to go hang out at the Torrens every weekend, I remember every weekend we’d be going to the Torrens and people would just go there and get pissed, it was all the same group, everyone had like the piercings, skinny jeans, band t-shirts and stuff, there was a good 30 to 50 people would just catch up randomly on weekends at that big pergola at Elder Park … (male, 18, ex-metalcore, northern suburbs)

Two key themes stand out here and in previous findings (see Rowe & Savelsberg 2010). First, young people in the northern suburbs are bored. There are limited options for leisure pursuits; instead, young people are left to devise their own activities. Second, very few young people in the northern suburbs regularly venture outside of the area, if at all. It is not uncommon to talk to young people who have never been to the city, nor visited the beach. Transport justice is a continuing
issue in the northern suburbs as many families
do not own a car, and public transport is
notoriously inadequate (see Loud Actions
Youth Forum 2009).

For young people in the northern suburbs,
the appeal of becoming a scene kid becomes
vivid. The scene can offer something to do
and it can provide a “legitimate” reason
to travel out of the northern suburbs and
experience the world.

Who can I be? Where can it take me?
Young people growing up in conditions
of social and economic disadvantage are
vulnerable to having “unchosen” identities
ascribed to them, which are positioned in
the context of marginalisation (Bottrell 2007).
For these young people, it is not uncommon
to grow up with unchosen identity labels
(perpetuated in the media) such as “povs”
and “ferals” (Milnes & Hyde 2009). Breaking
out of the social and economic constraints of
marginalisation is difficult enough, yet these
young people must also contend with the
psychological constraints of unchosen and
disparaging social identities. Despite these
challenges, Bottrell (2007) argues that young
people routinely construct “chosen” identities
as a means of resistance against disparaging
“unchosen” identities.

Forging identities of choice may well be
routine for young people in the northern
suburbs. What is different perhaps for
“would be scene kids” is the added allure
of a legitimate reason to venture out of
the northern suburbs and into the city of
Adelaide. As participants revealed, scene
kid status is dependent on meeting one or
more criteria:

If you have money, you can buy yourself in to
the scene, but if you’re cool enough you could
get into the scene for nothing. You had to
have something, you had to either make them
look good, or have money, or know bands.
Sometimes it’s almost appealing, cos you’d
always have something to do, you’d never be
bored … (female, 18, metal/deathcore)

The most accessible “scene currency”
for young people out north appears to be
abundant piercings. Piercings can be acquired
cheaply and quickly in great volumes.

Without exception, the young metalcore fans
from the northern suburbs who took part
in this research had the greatest numbers
of piercings:

By that time I was ridden with piercings,
home piercings I’d done myself, my ankles,
my webbing, my face was covered, I had
hundreds of piercings, yeah, I was 13. At that
show there was a wall of death happening,
and chicks were just getting their bridge
piercings torn out their faces – I got both my
ankle piercings ripped out and the guys from
Underoath were like what? They saw my
ankle and thought it was brutal, there’s like
this little child at our show getting torn up –
but after that I couldn’t get enough, I was like
yes! I love this! (female, 18, metal/deathcore)

When you go and get piercings and stuff it
[scene involvement] gets a lot more intense
then, I first got my lip pierced when I was 14
so I’ve had these for a good four years and
then eventually I had my whole face done and
stuff … (male, 18, ex-metalcore)

These participants both displayed
extensive scarring from removed and failed
piercings. Other young people from the
northern suburbs were also extensively
scarred from piercing removals, whether by
voluntary or injurious removal. In contrast,
young people from the Adelaide Hills had
far more discreet piercings, if any at all. Of
course this could be due to various reasons,
including (but not limited to) private school
uniform policies and parental authority as
suggested by one participant living in the
Adelaide Hills region. The abundance of
piercings and extensive scarring displayed by
participants from the northern suburbs raises
important questions around the purpose of
these body modifications and what young
people perceive to gain from acquiring them.
The accounts of some participants suggest
that piercings may serve as passports to the
scene: a place (whether spatial or temporal)
where marginalised young people may feel
they can construct chosen identities and find
respite from the stigma of unchosen identities
associated with disadvantage.

Young people are clearly resourceful
and imaginative. If alternative “legitimate”
purposes for travelling outside the northern suburbs are not co-constructed with young people, they will undoubtedly continue to organise and mobilise themselves. The fact they are currently doing this for themselves is impressive, but the cost of achieving it is potentially too high. Sleeping overnight on a river bank far from home, binge drinking and group violence have been reported as going hand in hand with being a scene kid – adding to the (often do-it-yourself) multiple piercings that carry risks of infection and injury, as documented by Koenig and Carnes (1999). Beyond the immediate dangers for young people’s health and wellbeing, questions must also be raised around the impact of these lifestyle choices on transitions through various social contexts, as indicated by the following account:

I just recently got set up with Workskill to try and get a job, I’ve been trying for ages just taking my own resume and stuff but no-one ever replies, so I took out most of my piercings, I just thought it would make it easier … but yeah, I just never get the call back cos of the piercings, but I definitely wanna keep my bridge in, it’s so good … (male, 18, metalcore)

The suggestion that this participant does not get calls back from employers due to facial piercings was made to this young person by their job network advisor. Whether this is true or not, it is what this young person believes and this self-view has the potential to negatively impact on his aspirations and motivations toward employment (Côté & Levine 2002). Hence it would seem imperative that youth transitions research continues to embrace more holistic investigations of young people’s experiences by exploring their cultural affiliations and practices while keeping sight of the structural influences that shape them.

Conclusion

The findings in this paper resonate through Black, Walsh and Taylor’s (2011, p.43) recent arguments that young people are already demonstrating will and capacity to leverage real change in a range of social settings, perhaps “in ways not always understood”.

The data presented have initiated insights into how young people are leveraging such change, tempered with questions around the impact of these changes on young people’s holistic development and broader social transitions.

Scene kids are still confronting basic transition issues such as schooling and post-school education, training and employment. For the scene kids from the northern suburbs, material circumstances have not changed much, yet they are continually developing new priorities and responding to them in new and innovative ways. Whether this will have lasting effects on other pursuits and movements through the life course demands to be the focus of future investigation. Moreover, it warrants an increased focus on the nature and scope of identity work as young people engage in more fluid social environments. For marginalised young people, this will all too often mean swimming upstream through Bauman’s (2000) liquid modern world.

Notes

1. A comprehensive account of existing heavy metal sub-genres can be found at: <http://mapofmetal.com/#/home>.
2. “Moshing” is the style of dance performed at metal concerts; a mosh pit is the space in which moshing occurs, generally located directly in front of the stage.
4. ‘The Torrens’ refers to the River Torrens, the segment of the river that participants refer to and congregate at is situated in the Central Business District of Adelaide.
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