

# **Ageing in a Spectacular ‘Youth Culture’: Continuity, Change and Community Amongst Older Goths**

## **Abstract**

This article explores the continuing involvement in youth music and style cultures of older participants through examination of the case study of the goth scene. It does so in the context of a widespread neglect, until recently, of what happens to participants of ‘youth cultures’ as they move beyond adolescence and also of a growing consensus about the broadening of youth itself as a life course period. Drawing on recent work on older participants in other music and style related groupings, the article uses original qualitative research to examine the developing lives and identities of goths as they become older. Rather than regarding continuing participation as a simple extension of youth, the focus is on the ways participation accompanied and was reconciled with material, domestic and physical elements of developing adult lives. Through reference to the case study, I emphasize the ways the experience of ageing for long-term music and style culture participants can constitute a collective experience.

**Keywords:** Subculture; identity; ageing; community; goth; adulthood

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## **Introduction**

From mod, to rave and punk to hip hop, ‘youth cultures’ centred upon distinct style, music and associated practices, have inspired several decades of sociological research. Until recently, however, such groups have been primarily understood as youth phenomena and regarded as a temporary accompaniment to the broader experience of being adolescent. Sure enough, many music or style groupings have indeed been dominated by those in their late teens and early twenties. Yet the extent of the focus on youth has entailed a neglect of what happens to participants as they become older. This article contributes to an emerging literature which has begun to address this gap. It does so by providing an analysis of some recent qualitative research focused on older participants of the goth scene, a longstanding subcultural group which emerged in the early 1980s and centres on particular dark forms of music, style and imagery.

The discussion explores the balance, interplay and negotiation, for older goths, between their continuing subcultural involvement and the development of adult responsibilities, interests, bodies and identities. While recognizing the significance of individually distinct life trajectories, the discussion draws attention to the ways the process of ageing can comprise a shared, subcultural experience. For, rather than forming an increasingly isolated minority within an otherwise youthful community, older goths have remained involved in sufficient numbers that their scene itself is increasingly dominated by the over-thirties. As its participants have grown up together, the collective values, norms and infrastructure of the subculture have adapted to their shifting lives. Continuing participation, then, seemed often to have more to do with the collective negotiation of adulthood than with individual quests to cling onto youth. Through elaborating on the case of older goths in this way, the article

contributes to developing work on older participation in ‘youth cultures’ and to broader understandings of the navigation of developing adult identities in contemporary societies.

### **Into adulthood**

The changing status of ‘youth’ has been the subject of considerable discussion in recent years. Previously understood as a discrete period comprising the late teens and very early twenties, its brevity and clarity are argued to have been challenged, particularly by an apparent expansion into and beyond the late twenties. The growth of higher and post-graduate education, temporary and casual work and female career opportunities, alongside associated propensities to delay ‘adult’ shifts such as moving out of parental or shared accommodation, getting married and having children, each have been deemed contributors to the situation.

According to Tanner and Arnett’s (2009) interpretation of such developments, the period between 18 and 25 has emerged as a new exploratory time of ‘emerging adulthood’ which now bridges adolescence and early adulthood. Others envisage a broader, more flexible sense of the boundaries between youth and adulthood which encompasses a range of trajectories and transitions, including, for example, yo-yoing between more youthful and more adult orientations as circumstances change throughout (and sometimes beyond) the twenties (Du Bois-Reymond 2009). Questions also have been raised as to the role of social class and other inequalities with respect to such developments. For some, flexibility and agency with respect to the longevity of youthful lifestyles may largely be the preserve of middle class youth (e.g. Heinz 2009; Heath 2009), something of interest for a paper focused on the case study of the goth scene, whose participants mostly fall within this category.

Either way, the apparent tendency towards an expansion in the longevity of youthful approaches to life may offer a valuable starting point in explaining the increasing propensity of those involved in music and style communities to continue to participate beyond their early twenties. After all, living arrangements dominated by shared houses, relationship statuses which fluctuate and working lives centred on short-term work or post-graduate study all appear to fit more neatly with familiar youth cultural activities such as going out frequently and maintaining a distinctive appearance than do marriage, children, mortgages and long-term career progression. At the very least, the lack of any clear post-teen jump into adulthood may create the space for more lasting attachments to music and style cultures.

Yet the concern of this paper is not merely with enduring subcultural participation as a simple expansion of youth, or indeed as an expression of a new intermediary life course stage. Rather, the focus is on those who remain involved in music and style communities not only into their late twenties but also their thirties and forties – and who, in many cases, do so alongside the taking on of increasingly ‘adult’ orientations and responsibilities. As we shall see, continuing participation in this case, might be better conceived not as an alternative to the development of adulthood, but rather as a fully fledged part of the process.

### **Ageing participants or ageing communities?**

Until recently, questions about older participants and ageing in relation to music and style communities have rarely been explored in depth. As Bennett (2006) points out, those earlier studies that did mention older participants tended to play down their involvement or dismiss them as isolated misfits, unable to come to terms with their advancing years. However, research by scholars such as Holland (2004), Bennett (2006) and others has begun to provide more nuanced accounts.

Such work has focused particularly on the negotiation between continued participation and the various physical, social and material features of developing adulthood. Bennett, for example, discusses the ‘toning down’ of appearance among older punks, as well as their tendency to go out less often and to stand at the back of gigs rather than to mosh (dance aggressively) with younger participants, as part of their adoption of an experienced ‘forefather’ role. Holland discusses the self-policing of alternative appearances by her female respondents, who sought to balance ‘personal authenticity’ with understandings of age-appropriateness. Joanna Davis’ (2006) small-scale study of older punks also indicates the emergence of discourses about ‘appropriate’ forms of ageing participation, with those unwilling to adapt as they age sometimes derided by other older participants. A similar set of narratives emerge in Gregory’s study of older rave participants (2009), with particular emphasis on the perceived incompatibilities between core elements of rave culture, such as drug-use, and the development of adulthood responsibilities, particularly parenthood.

A prominent feature of some studies is the contention that participation becomes increasingly personalized and less community-oriented as people get older. For Bennett (2006: 223), punk gradually becomes ‘a more individualistic and individually articulated, form of association’, centred more on an internalized punk persona than on ‘visual style, frequent face-to-face gatherings and a publicly articulated collective identity’. Likewise, Haenfler (2009) shows how, for older straight-edge participants, group belonging and collective style norms gradually became less important as sXe identity developed into a broader individual philosophy. Such observations have prompted some to suggest the fixed, collective implications of the term subculture may be less useful than the more flexible concept ‘music scene’ as means to make sense of older participation. ‘Scene’ is deemed better able to allow for the ‘variety of practices through which individuals retain a commitment to music’ (Bennett 2006: 223) and ‘the complex and subtle processes of identity negotiation’ experienced by older participants (Davis 2006: 64).

Debates over the relative merits of scene, subculture, neo-tribe and a range of other conceptual descriptors for music and style communities have accounted for numerous pages within youth cultural studies (e.g. Bennett and Harris 2004) and such arguments over terminology can become distracting. Consistent with previous work in which I have argued for the continuing value of the term as a way to refer to distinct, substantive music or style communities (Hodkinson 2002), I use ‘subculture’ to describe the world of the goth scene in this article, but this ought not to signal any particular objection to the use of scene by others.

Of greater importance are substantive questions about whether participation in such groups is indeed liable to become more personalized and less community-oriented as people age – and about the nature of the relationship between individual and collective ageing. As I shall show, in the case of the goth scene, elements of collective participation did often become somewhat less intense among older participants as involvement was negotiated with developing adult responsibilities, priorities and bodies. However, in contrast to some studies of other groupings, older goths rarely found themselves isolated within their community. They had continued to participate in high numbers and there was a clear collective character to their developing identities.

### **Research approach**

The research data presented here emerged from ongoing participant observation at a variety of goth events and a preliminary set of interviews involving 16 UK-based individuals aged between 27 and 43 and evenly split between male and female. All were long-term

participants in the goth scene, most were in a long-term co-habiting relationship and four were parents. Consistent with the broader demographics of the scene (see below), most were middle class and all but one were white. The interviews were in depth and informal, lasting between 45 and 130 minutes, and carried out between January and April 2010 in locations across England. Nine of the respondents had taken part, over a decade earlier, in ethnographic research on the goth scene I conducted in the late 1990s (Hodkinson 2002). The opportunity to interview these participants for a second time offered a chance to assess for myself the changes and continuities in their identities. Most of the additional respondents were recruited as a result of their connections with these existing participants. A further point worthy of note is that, as a long-term participant of the goth scene myself, I have a status as an insider researcher with respect to the group, a subject on which I have reflected at length elsewhere (Hodkinson 2005).

### **The goth scene: background**

The goth scene emerged in the UK in early 1980s. A collection of promoters, bands and fans developed the seeds of what was to become a distinctively dark, androgynous style of music and fashion with connections to broader cultural traditions of horror and Gothic. On the back of niche media publicity and music industry involvement, goth became a defiant and committed subcultural community centred on distinct sinister sounds and an instantly recognizable dark style, dominated by black hair and clothing and striking styles of makeup for both males and females (see Hodkinson 2002).

Consistent with comparable youth cultures, everyday goth participation revolved around classic forms of youthful hedonism, including frequent late-night clubbing, heavy alcohol and sometimes drug use, sexual exploration and transgressive forms of stylistic display. In particular, established understandings of gendered dress were traversed by the spectacular embrace of a dark feminine look – including slimness, long hair, tight clothing and makeup – by goth males (Brill 2008). Consistent with such ‘youthful’ transgression, the majority of goth participants in the scene’s earlier years were in their teens or early twenties, with older enthusiasts a visible minority. Over the last decade or so, however, the number remaining involved into their thirties and beyond has increased substantially. Simultaneously, the number of new teenage recruits has reduced, a degree of separation opening up between the goth scene’s ageing body of participants and a newer and discrete set of goth-influenced teenage cultures, including ‘emo’, which combined elements of the goth look with its own dark forms of punk and alternative rock music and often took place in its own distinct – and younger – spaces.

As with some (though not all) other ‘alternative’ music scenes, the goth scene is overwhelmingly white and largely middle-class. More distinctively, even during the days in which it was dominated by teenagers’ youthful excess, the collective outlook of a subculture which recruited heavily from those labelled as geekish in the school environment still tended to place a certain value on being intelligent, well-read and educationally successful. As one of my respondents put it:

*Jane (29):* I think a lot of the time, I mean I don’t think I’ve ever met a really stupid goth – you know, I think a lot of people are... quite well educated in the goth scene... you know you want to socialize with people who view the world in a similar way...

In this respect, goth is at least partially distinct from some other music and style communities, including certain manifestations of punk and dance culture, whose value systems fit less neatly with what could be construed as an establishment arbiter of success. The possible connection of this to substantial older participation in the goth scene will be touched upon later.

### **Subjective attachments**

Previous research on the goth scene, including my own, has indicated a particularly strongly held sense of belonging and identity among participants (Hodkinson 2002; Brill 2008). For the older participants in the present study, an enduring sense of personal belonging to the goth scene was apparent and most thought it likely the subculture would remain important to them for the foreseeable future, as here:

*Michael (39):* ... I don't know how things are going to end up but... there is no temptation to call it quits, I still like it, every time I go out I am like 'this is fun, I should do this more often'... so I found a subculture that I fit, I am comfortable in and I mean... let it go for as long as it can...

The way that Michael and others articulated their continuing attachment also tended to indicate that, in contrast to the punks and straight-edgers studied by Bennett (2006) and Haenfler (2009), their subjective conception of what it meant to be goth had remained fairly specific and collective. That is, rather than being diluted into a sort of flexible private persona or philosophy with little public articulation, goth still seemed usually to be understood as an identifiable community centred on event attendance and particular collective tastes.

Nevertheless, when asked about subjective identity in more detail, some reflected on a decline in the *relative* status of goth. Steven, for example, contrasted his hesitation about its level of importance vis-a-vis other aspects of his identity with the certainty he would have expressed on the subject in the past:

*Steven (39):* I would say it is far less than before... I would say now I see it actually as more of... something to dip in and out of if that makes sense... Whereas I wouldn't have said that ten years ago, I would have said 'oh yeah, it's my life', kind of thing... but whether that's just because... I have become better at blending different aspects of what I do, I don't know.

Steven's uncertainty about the subjective importance of goth was not shared by all respondents. However, his articulation of the scene as something to 'dip in and out of', had more universal relevance with respect to the intensity of older goth participation *in practice*. Even for those who insisted that attachment to goth as a community *felt* as important as ever, the intensity of everyday participation had often decreased, as here:

*Mark (36):* I have no problem with being considered goth – 'I am a goth', there we go!  
Interviewer: ... that was... my last question actually – *now*, is the goth scene something that you *do* sometimes or is it something that you *are*?  
*Mark:* It is something that I *am*.  
*Rosie (27):* Yeah it's still something I *am*.  
*Mark:* It's something I'd *like* to do! [laughter]

Mark's comment was exaggerated for comic effect – both he and Rosie had continued to 'do' goth in various ways. However, they, like most of their contemporaries, had made adaptations to their practical involvement as they sought to balance commitment to the

goth scene with their developing adult lives. The following sections outline some of the adaptations made by goths, particularly with respect to two of the most important aspects of goth subcultural participation: event attendance and appearance.

### **Public participation**

Going out to subcultural events, which had been at the centre of goth participation ever since the subculture first emerged, had remained of great importance to my interviewees' conceptions of their goth identities. However, commitment to doing so increasingly had to be balanced with developing responsibilities and priorities. 'Back in the day', as many put it, going out late once or twice a week had been the norm but, as they had become older, this had often reduced to once a month and sometimes was limited to special occasions, as Jon explains:

*Jon (38):* ...I tend to pick and choose what I do go to, very very carefully now... It must be a very, very good gig. If it is an evening out, there must be a reason for it, and I must know a lot of my friends are going to be out, otherwise I would tend to dismiss it...

Experiences of going out had also changed qualitatively. Unlike the older punks who would stand at the back of venues in Bennett's aforementioned study, dancing had remained of great importance for many older goths. Less aggressive or physical than punk or metal moshing, typical goth style of dance were perhaps more accessible to older participants, whose participation in dancing also was made easier because their relatively high number reduced the likelihood of being isolated on a floor filled by teenagers. In spite of the enduring importance of dance, however, many had developed a preference for venues whose layout or volume levels also accommodated sitting down and quality conversation, both of which had become more important over the years. Meanwhile, although going out still often involved intoxicated socialising and flirting, these had often become less intense than in the past. Likewise, many would go home earlier in the evening than when they were younger.

These changes to going out practices were closely connected to other elements of people's developing adult lives.

### ***Prioritizing work***

Full-time work was often afforded a greater priority than in previous years and this affected people's ability to go out. In spite of their predominantly middle-class backgrounds, many had spent time in temporary or casual employment subsequent to the completion of further or higher education, regarding it as a short-term means to fund their goth-centred lifestyle. Others found that post-graduate study enabled them to continue to go out frequently. By their late twenties and thirties, however, many were devoting considerable energy to developing professional careers. Even for those who remained in casual or routine employment, increased financial responsibilities rendered work increasingly important. Either way, the importance attached to work made going out more difficult, as for Claire, a university research administrator:

*Claire (27):* I s'pose right at the start work was a means to an end, to get enough money, to go out with friends and to go clubbing or go drinking. And now, I... care a lot more about work and work actually hampers my social life. Because I throw all my time and energy into work... And that's really quite sad.... There is that Tuesday once a month thing and we always talk about going, but it's Tuesday and... I would have to at least book a half day on Wednesday to enable me to go, because I can't go... to work still drunk or hung over and tired...

The tinge of regret evoked here by Claire was not untypical, reflecting a tendency for mixed feelings about the impact of the increased importance of career on the intensity of goth participation. Like Mark's aforementioned comment about wishing he could 'do' goth more, Claire's sadness also illustrates something of a tension between the increasing embrace of established versions of adult responsibility and the primary emphasis in the subcultural values with which they had grown up on the display of social commitment to the goth scene through frequent attendance at late-night events (see Hodkinson 2002). Nevertheless, there remained at least an element of compatibility between the longstanding value placed on intelligence within the goth scene and older participants' eventual emphasis on their professional careers – something that may have made the squaring of career and goth identities a little easier than might otherwise have been the case.

### ***Children***

Tensions and mixed feelings relating to competing commitments also sometimes applied to those with children, for whom the importance of being fresh in the morning – and hence of curtailing nights out – was accentuated further, as Matthew explains:

*Matthew (43):* And also you don't wanna be too tired... you don't wanna be out 'til two in the morning... and getting drunk... 'Cos obviously the next morning there's a little person... wide awake... That's how it's changed as well – a bit more responsibility now.

Alongside the more substantial obstacle of arranging childcare, such concerns meant that the onset of children often prompted a fairly significant decline in goth participation. Interestingly, though, continued subjective attachment to the scene and to social networks connected to it sometimes prompted parents eventually to find ways to over-come the obstacles and to start going out again. Sometimes, partners would take it in turns to go out and stay in, while in other cases regular arrangements with relatives or other third parties would enable them to go out together, as in Matthew and Susan's case:

*Susan (33):* So, but as she's got older, like, we stay a night at my mum's. So if we're going out in Birmingham we'll stay over at my mum's house the night. Put [name] to bed at my mum's house. Go out. And then we go back to mum's, 'cos [name]'s asleep, usually asleep before we've left, still asleep when we get back so...

### ***Tiredness***

Many associated their employment, children or other responsibilities with a broader tiredness which contributed to fewer and shorter nights out. Greater fatigue was also sometimes attributed to physical ageing and, in this respect, going out late and becoming intoxicated were often reported to have an increasingly severe impact. This even affected those who had continued to go out intensively, such as Steven, who was finding all-night clubs (those which continued until 6 or 7 in the morning) less appealing as a result of the extra recovery time required:

*Steven (39):* the last two or three years I have found if I go and spend all night at a club and come back at 7am, instead of taking half of Sunday to recover, it now takes me longer to recover. So I prefer to go to a club that finishes at 2 a.m. ... just because you can have a night out rather than giving up the whole weekend for it.

### ***Motivation, relationships and ‘comfort’***

Important though they were, responsibilities and tiredness did not fully explain the tendency to go out less intensively. In spite of the mixed feelings they often had about going out less, some also reported a somewhat lower motivation levels. This sometimes reflected a broadening of interests and activities, so that goth events had now become one option among various sources of social fulfilment. Also, many had become comfortable in the company of particular sets of long-term friends. Such friendship circles were often dominated by goths – illustrating the enduring importance of the subculture – but sometimes were sufficiently established that socialising in restaurants or local pubs, or in one another’s houses, was sometimes as appealing as going out on the goth scene. In one case this more privatized form of goth socialising had even become institutionalized. Susan described how a group of goth friends had formed what they had semi-jokingly called the Alternative Women’s Institute, which had a Facebook group and centred on monthly meetings in the homes of members:

*Susan (33):* Like my friend’s started this thing called... the Alternative Women’s Institute. It was girls, once a month we’ll all get together, all goth girls....

*Interviewer:* And so it’s like always at someone’s house?

*Susan:* Yeah, we take it in turns... for the March one it’s gonna be here and it’s gonna be zumba fitness....

An even more important factor with respect to declining motivation to go out was relationship status. Those involved in long-term relationships often were less keen to go out frequently as a result of the constantly available personal companionship they enjoyed and a diminished desire to meet sexual partners. In particular, respondents who were married or cohabiting recognized that this had affected their desire to go out frequently, while others described their disappointment at friends who had dropped out of the scene after moving in with a partner.

Alongside awareness of responsibilities, tiredness and physical limitations, stable long-term relationships seemed to be one of the primary drivers towards a greater stress on being and feeling *comfortable*, whether in respect of staying in, socialising privately with friends, drinking less or going home early. It even seemed to manifest itself in the form of a greater propensity to drive directly to and from venues (which itself affected alcohol consumption) rather than negotiating public transport, taxis or the streets of the city.

Importantly, however, the connection between circumstances such as relationship status and participation meant that going out sometimes went up as well as down. Many assured me that, were their relationship to end, their drive to attend goth events and stay out later – and hence to break out of their ‘comfort zone’ – would increase substantially, while others attributed previous fluctuations in participation to the success and failure of relationships. The issue was particularly current for Ruth, who had recently separated from her husband:

*Ruth (33):* ...when I left [my husband] it was like, ‘Ah! I remember I am supposed to be this goth’... and all my tastes came back and... I have been going out more, going to loads of clubs and mainly I think... mainly more to meet up with people...

Crucially, then, although there was a general trend was for people’s public goth participation to reduce with age, the process was rarely a smooth or entirely linear one.



Rather, intensity of involvement would fluctuate too and fro at various points, often in relation to developments or ruptures in other elements of individual life trajectories. Equally important, the tendency to throw oneself back into the scene following break-ups or other life changes served to illustrate its lasting familiarity and importance, as did the ambivalence expressed by some at their declining participation and, most importantly, the fact that many had found ways to continue to go out reasonably often in spite of the cumulative factors identified.

### **Developing appearances**

Going out to goth events was strongly related to other facets of participation. When they first became involved, many experienced a spiral of intensification whereby the more they went out, the greater their enthusiasm to intensify involvement in other ways, not least refining their subcultural appearance. For older goths, this circular relationship sometimes manifested itself in the opposite direction. A decline in the frequency of going out was sometimes accompanied by a reduction in the intensity of things like subcultural grooming. Without the collective rewards provided by its exhibition to others at a weekly night out, hair might be dyed less frequently, the urge to acquire new goth clothes might be reduced and so on. Yet gradual changes over time to subcultural appearance, which, as in other studies (e.g. Bennett 2006), were understood by respondents as a form of ‘toning down’, cannot be fully explained as a knock-on effect of reduced social participation, and neither were they exclusive to those who went out the least.

### ***Work and ‘appearance flexibility’***

Only a few respondents reported having direct problems with their appearance at work and most seemed to have ended up in forms of work which offered a degree of leeway. Some had even combined work and leisure interests by developing their own specialist goth-oriented promotion or retail businesses. Here, ‘looking the part’ became a potential advantage. Others worked in a range of employment sectors (often, though not always within the professional sphere) which had a somewhat relaxed approach to appearance, as here:

*Robert (36):* ... it does help that IT is my career path because it is very goth friendly... in fact a lot of goths I end up bumping into – they’re all into IT, because we’re in a dark basement... you’re over the phone or email or whatever... and some of the people in the IT world are just generally a bit leftfield anyway...

Whether or not they were in a tolerant environment, however, many had developed a somewhat more work-friendly adaptation of their goth appearance for weekdays. Their subcultural identity often was still visible – to the extent that some were subject to friendly banter about it from colleagues – but hair might be tied back, visible piercings might be removed and some form of office-style clothing worn. For some this reflected a desire to ‘feel professional’ at work, while others felt that, even if there were no official requirements, their appearance might affect the chances of career progression. Jane explains:

*Jane (29):* I think the older you get the more you realize that, you don’t want to try to fit in, as in like stop wearing what I want to wear, but you do kind of tone it down a bit for the sake of furthering yourself. Because you’re like ‘well I’m just shooting myself in the foot here’, what’s the point in trying to – like making life more difficult for yourself?

Whether it was enforced or chosen, this emphasis on toning down for work meant that considerable value was placed, as people became more work-oriented, on *appearance flexibility*, or the ability to switch easily between work and non-work modes. This mitigated against less adaptable features which had been popular among younger goths, including fluorescent coloured hair or extensive facial piercings and also made time-intensive temporary adornments such as black nail varnish seem less worthwhile because of the need to reverse them by Monday morning.

While it did have the potential to encourage change, however, work seemed less significant as a driver of appearance change than broader developments in their motivations and understandings.

### ***Declining appearance competitiveness***

Some respondents insisted their need to compete for attention through subcultural appearance had reduced over time. As in the case of most other subcultures, such competition often had been a key driver of earlier goth participation, prompting extensive energy to be spent on the ongoing enhancement of one's personal version of the goth look and on individual outfit preparations. While it did remain a source of motivation with respect to appearance, the intensity of this competition for status - or subcultural capital<sup>1</sup>, as Thornton (1995) would have it - did seem to have declined somewhat, as Jon explained:

*Jon (38):* There is always that element when you are younger... of the peacock – almost that your dress and your way of behaving when you are out, is you know, essentially an attracter – and as I have got older you learn to feel... more accepting of the way you are... and it doesn't become so precious...

Like the desire to go out itself, appearance competitiveness was often linked with relationship status and friendships. Those content within long-term relationships and/or established friendship groups tended to be less driven to court attention through elaborate forms of subcultural dress – and this could sometimes work in the other direction too, with some describing intensifications of subcultural grooming following break-ups or the decline of established friendships.

In spite of fluctuations, an overall movement towards stable sets of relationships seemed to combine with a more general feeling among older participants of having become familiar and secure within goth spaces. This formed part of the discursive establishment of a specific identity as an older goth, endowed with greater levels of maturity, experience and authenticity, as distinct from the frantic emphasis on status and attention-seeking assigned to younger participants, including their former selves. Perceived liberation from this adolescent status competition was also connected the emphasis of some participants on the increasing importance of *comfort* – whether through avoiding the physical discomfort associated with adornments such as ultra-high heeled boots, rubber outfits or heavy makeup, or the development of a broader desire to be able to dance and socialize without attracting excessive attention.

### ***Changing bodies and age appropriateness***

For all the talk of security, in practice this older goth identity had appearance pressures and insecurities of its own. Many expressed anxiety about the danger of dressing up in a manner inappropriate to their ageing self, a theme also identified in studies of punk and alternative culture (Davis 2006; Holland 2004). The general desire to avoid being seen as

over-competitive or attention-seeking – both of which associated by respondents with adolescent participation – sometimes formed part of this. Equally important, however, were specific concerns about bodily changes, which often were expressed by invoking the spectre of inappropriately dressed ‘others’, as here:

*Jane (29):* ... you can sit there and look at somebody on the dance floor and think ‘oh my God, do I look like that when I wear similar things?’, you know, they’re there gyrating and things and they look sort of all wobbly or something and they’ve squeezed into this PVC and everything’s bulging over the sides... you’ve got no other yardstick really.

As in Samantha Holland’s study of a range of ageing alternative women (2004), negative images of others had helped concentrate attention on adapting one’s look in order to continue to exhibit goth identity in a manner deemed suitable for older bodies. Increases in size and weight were of particular importance to both genders and often prompted a move towards looser fitting outfits and covering up.

*Rosie (27):* I tell you what, my body has changed a lot in the last five years and my wardrobe has had to change to accommodate that. I used to be stick thin and I would wear next to nothing – PVC, fishnets, midriff hanging out all over the place and I was happy like that and it was fine – but I couldn’t do that now.

A partial exception here was a version of female goth style which centred on black Victorian style flowing skirts or dresses and corsets, which enabled much of the body to be covered at the same time as displaying substantial breast cleavage.

With respect to makeup, many women retained subculturally distinctive styles, but the perception that heavy makeup tended to look less flattering on coarser facial skin sometimes contributed to a shift towards a ‘less is more’ approach, as one respondent put it. Meanwhile, for males, who often had the additional problem of increasingly heavy stubble, the wearing of makeup – formerly a key symbol of subcultural identity for many – had become fairly unusual beyond the early thirties. Likewise, the loss of head hair made it increasingly difficult to retain the distinctive dyed and/or long hair by which goths often had been recognized as such in their earlier years. Many responded by having their hair cut short or shaved and this sometimes acted as a catalyst to the development of a more conservative appearance in other respects.

Of course, the nature of appearance changes partially depended on how much individual bodies had changed. Older men who had remained slim and avoided baldness sometimes had retained a striking and androgynous look characterized by long hair, tight fitting clothes and makeup, for example. Others had developed adaptations which enabled them to retain elements of their younger appearance in spite of bodily changes. Michael had used hats and hair adornments to retain a distinctive androgynous look in spite of a receding hairline:

*Michael (39):* ... the hair thing is a big deal... usually I wear a hat or something... I did wear a hat at 25 but now I sort of have to...

*Interviewer:* But... you seem to have found ways to adapt...

*Michael:* Yeah, so the hair extensions are... well the [hair] band is mostly there because the join is not terribly nice in the front... but yeah hair bands, I wear a lot of hats...

Michael’s case illustrates that, while many had toned down their appearance, others had defied mainstream notions of age-appropriateness by continuing to develop the most

striking interpretations of the goth look. Likewise, Jackie still spent several hours preparing her appearance every time she went out and insisted her look was getting more rather than less extreme:

*Jackie (43):* I am getting bigger! In more ways than one.... the makeup again has got bigger because I have been getting into false eyelashes... they get bigger, they are huge things!

Interviewer – Have you ever gone through phases where you started to tone things down more?

Jackie – It's going the opposite I feel... I find I can't do subtle anymore, it's very difficult!

### **Ageing community**

A number of points can be extracted from this brief discussion. First, there was an overall tendency for practical subcultural participation to decline somewhat as individuals became older. Nevertheless, levels and types of involvement both fluctuated over time and varied from one individual to the next. Second, whether in respect of the overall declining intensity or the fluctuations, levels and types of continuing participation seemed closely related to a range of other elements of developing adult lives. In particular, reductions in the frequency of going out and in the extremity of appearance were often connected to the increasing importance of work, the establishment of long-term friendships and, most of all, the onset of long-term cohabiting or marital relationships and/or parenthood. Consciousness of ageing and of ageing bodies, meanwhile, played a substantial role with respect to the refinement of appearance. Amongst other things this range of factors cumulatively encouraged in participants a gradually increasing emphasis on *comfort* – as something of a theme of continuation of participation into adulthood and middle-age.

So where did all these developments leave the goth scene itself as a collective entity? In some respects, the changing identities explored here did suggest a partial manifestation of the more personalized or individualized forms of older involvement identified by Bennett (2007), Haenfler (2009), Davis (2006) and others. After all, types and levels of involvement differed more substantially than in the past between one goth and the next according to the specificities of broadening adult trajectories and fluctuating individual circumstances. Meanwhile, the overall reduction in levels of practical involvement particularly affected frequency of attendance at public goth events, suggesting at least some reduction in the cohesion of the goth scene as a community. The increasing tendency for participants to stay in with partners or socialize with individual sets of long-term goth friends in non-goth spaces might also suggest some privatization of practical involvement.

Nevertheless, goth as a community remained of great importance to participants. Not only did they continue to feel strongly attached to it in subjective terms but most had continued to understand goth as a specific set of collectively experienced tastes and practices centred on appearance, music, cultural forms and events, rather than something more general or personalized. Even for those who had embraced adulthood priorities the most, mixed feelings about their declining goth participation were often evident, illustrating ongoing tensions between their gravitation towards relatively mainstream goals relating to work, family and so on and the emphasis on intense commitment to goth music, style and late nights which dominated the subcultural values of their formative years. And the continuing influence of such values had clearly helped to ensure that, although practical participation tended to have reduced somewhat, many had continued to go to goth events about once a month and, even for those who didn't, the experience of attending occasional gigs and festivals remained of great importance. Similarly, many had toned down their appearance, but most had retained a distinctive public visual style and this, too, remained

of importance to their sense of self. In short, group belonging, collective visual style and publicly articulated subcultural identity remained important.

In spite of the specificity of each individual trajectory, the experience of ageing was itself something of a collective, subcultural journey for many goths. Rather than finding themselves increasingly isolated within a youth-dominated community, the number who had remained involved into their thirties and forties meant that adult participation had become an entrenched part of the goth scene itself. This was something that participants were conscious of. Ironic references to the ageing – and indeed to mixed feelings about their declining participation – were common, as in the following social networking site post oriented to goth readers:

Possibly a silly question as you're all really old and boring and no-one goes out anymore, but does anyone fancy Assemblage 23 and then erm possibly a particular nightclub in Angel that everyone's too cool for really but I won't tell I saw you there if you'll do the same for me.  
[Trafford, LiveJournal post, 2010]

Likewise, people regularly joked, in semi-disparaging style, about their increasingly 'adult' concerns and identities. On various occasions in goth clubs or pubs I observed conversations related to employment, house purchases and mortgages which ended with one participant remarking on how 'old' everyone was or expressing amusement about the juxtaposition of such conversational topics with the goth club setting in which they found themselves. Others commented dryly on their observation of apparent trends within the scene of adult life events such as marriages and pregnancies. One individual even identified, with a sense of amused resignation, what she saw as a 'goth baby boom'. Such examples illustrate not only a collective consciousness, but a degree of collective ambivalence about the contrast between their increasingly adult lives and their understandings of a more extreme form of goth participation associated with their younger years.

Crucially, then, the milieu and group consciousness of the goth scene itself were developing alongside the individual adult identities of many participants. And so were the collective norms of the subculture. Rather than being something entirely attributable to individual choice or life trajectory, developments in appearance as people became older were rarely individually unique. For example, the increasing visibility at goth events of what participants understood as a 'corporate goth' look, characterized by shirts, ties, and smart looking tops, trousers and skirts, seemed uncannily connected to the increasing importance of careers, as well as offering an approach to goth style compatible with the desire to look more mature, to cover up more, to wear looser clothes and so on. Robert explained that his own movement towards this style was strongly influenced by its popularity among others:

*Robert (36):* Once I hit thirty, I thought 'should I be wearing' you know, tops that come down to above my stomach and show my waist off?'. So what I did was to migrate, as a lot of people do, into slightly smarter clothes – so I had Jed Phoenix type bondage trousers – so pinstripe things but made with buckles and zips.... they weren't as shaped to your body... and I started wearing shirts with a tie – again it's because that's what people were doing.... it looks good on other people, why not try that...

In the case of men, collective developments such as this, alongside the increasing prevalence of baldness and the rarity of wearing makeup, meant that male androgyny,

which had been one of the defining features of the subculture in the past, had itself become rather less marked. Matthew and Susan reflected on the collective reduction of goth men wearing makeup:

*Matthew (43):* And occasionally, if I'm at Whitby [goth festival] I do go for a bit of eyeliner, but only occasionally... but I don't go for... all the full makeup that I used to get on

*Susan (33):* I don't think anybody does now [referring to men]... it's like everyone's kind of... the transition has been across the board...

Such developments, alongside the broader collective emphasis on age- and body-appropriateness and understandings of mature, experienced participation, serve as useful examples of the way some of the norms and tastes of the group – and with them collective rules and criteria of status – were gradually shifting to adapt to an older membership.

Finally, in various ways, the organizational and entrepreneurial infrastructure of the goth scene had responded to the developing priorities of its ageing participants. Many clubs had adjusted to running monthly due to the unwillingness of a substantial portion of their clientele to go out more often. Although many clubs continued to play new music, an increasing number of nostalgia-themed events had emerged, including 'Vagabonds' in London and 'Zombie Club' in Birmingham, which specialized in older music and attracted a particularly concentrated older clientele. Other developments included an increasing provision of types of clothing compatible with older bodies and identities among subcultural retailers. The increasing prevalence of parenthood among goths, meanwhile, had prompted the emergence of goth children's clothes as an important new line of business and even the development of dedicated support organizations such as Gothic-Family.Net, a German web-site providing information, advice and services for goth parents.

The collective ageing illustrated here seems to distinguish the goth scene, in this respect at least, from the emphasis on personalization of involvement of some other studies of ageing participants in different groupings. Goth has become more an ageing community than a youth culture involving a minority of ageing participants and, as such, comparable, to other ageing music scenes or communities, including, perhaps, the Brisbane queer scene focused upon by Taylor (2010) and the UK Northern Soul community examined by Smith (2009). Smith emphasizes the significance and unusualness of northern soul as a 'continuing scene... with the same body of continuing participants' (2009: 428), placing useful emphasis on the interplay of ageing community and ageing individual identities. Surprisingly, however, her analysis plays down the impact of this ageing base of participants on the collective character of the scene. Northern Soul is presented as a somewhat static, youthful set of activities and counter-posed to the otherwise middle-aged lives of many of its participants.

...the behaviours practiced within the scene are largely the same today as they have always been. What we are therefore presented with are youth actions, originally considered as distinct from adult society, being performed by adults (Smith 2009).

This formulation of otherwise adult participants continuing to involve themselves in northern soul as a set of youthful activities contrasts with my contention about the collective ageing of goths in this paper. For although a number of previous elements of the goth scene had remained as important as ever – from core stylistic and musical themes, to dressing up, to dancing and so on – the emphasis and character of the community had

nevertheless shifted as I have shown here. While it retained what might be construed as ‘youthful’ elements, then, its emphasis had gradually accommodated the developing priorities of its ageing participants and, as such, the goth scene had acquired in some respects a more adult character.

It has not been the primary purpose of this article to definitely explain why such high numbers of goths have remained involved in their subculture into their adulthood, or why some youth cultures – such as goth and northern soul – age and develop collectively while in others – such as punk (Bennett 2006), straight edge (Haenfler 2007) and some dance cultures (Gregory 2009) – older participants seem more likely to find themselves in the minority. Such questions are a little beyond the scope of the current data and difficult to answer with certainty. Nevertheless a few factors might form the basis for further exploration. The strength of commitment which characterized participation in the goth scene when most participants were younger, though probably not unique among such groups, was particularly notable (Hodkinson 2002), creating a level of personal and social investment that seems to have made remaining involved an easier, more obvious route than drifting away, especially in the broader context of increasingly long and diverse youth transitions. It is equally significant that, at a certain point, recruitment of younger people to the goth scene dwindled somewhat, helping older participation to become the norm rather than the curious exception and enabling the group itself to develop accordingly. Meanwhile, as outlined earlier, amongst its primary emphasis on clubbing, youthful exploration and spectacular style and music, goth not only was predominantly middle class but also placed value on intelligence and academic success, something which may have made an eventual reconciliation between subcultural participation and extensive professional commitment and success somewhat more feasible. Likewise, although centred on youthful excess in various forms, goth never comprehensively revolved around drug-taking or all-night dancing in the way that, for example, dance cultures have, making its later coexistence with careers, parenthood and older bodies more conceivable than for participants of the latter (see Gregory 2009).

Yet these specifics of the goth scene ought not to be overplayed to the extent that the subculture is regarded as always having been uniquely mainstream or adult-friendly. As is hopefully clear, professional success, going out infrequently, permanent relationships, having babies and moderating one’s appearance and levels of intoxication were not core components or priorities of the goth scene when most participants were under 25! The suggestion is merely that certain pre-existing features of youth cultures may, in the right circumstances, increase or decrease the likelihood that individuals will feel able to reconcile their navigations of adulthood with continuing participation and/or that collective values eventually will *become* more suited to such adult orientations to life.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the developing practices and identities of older participants in ‘youth cultures’ through a case study of goths in their late twenties, thirties and forties. I have outlined the ways that, rather than being seen as a means to cling onto one’s youth, the endurance of subcultural identities may sometimes accompany, adapt to and form part of the development of outlooks, responsibilities, bodies and identities which most would associate with adulthood. In the case study this often entailed the development of somewhat reduced intensity and more ‘comfortable’ forms of goth participation which complemented a greater emphasis on work, long-term friendships, committed relationships and children, while also accommodating physical changes to the body. Nevertheless, many

continued to participate regularly, most retained a distinctive subcultural appearance and a minority managed to do so without any substantial reduction in intensity. The study also illustrates how the process of ageing can be an uneven one, with many goths reporting fluctuations in their participation, usually in connection to other events in their lives.

Finally, I have shown how, in some circumstances, ageing as a member of a music and style community can be a collective process. For although in some respects goth identities seemed to become more privatized or personalized as people became older, for many long-term participants, their experience seemed partly to be one of growing up together as part of their subcultural community. As part of this, the feel and orientation of the community itself had developed and changed, from norms and expectations with respect to dress, to nostalgia-oriented clubs, to an increasing emphasis on catering for parents and children. Far from being isolated within a subculture dominated by youth, or fixated on a desperate attempt to retain their own adolescence, these participants found themselves still attached to a community which was ageing with them.

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## Note

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<sup>1</sup> Thornton (1995) develops the notion of 'subcultural capital' from the work of Bourdieu to refer to forms of knowledge, behaviour and ownership of consumables that generate status and social rewards within the value system of a subculture.