

GOTH:

IDENTITY, STYLE & SUBCULTURE

PAUL HODKINSON, 2002

CONTEXT Until the 1980s studies of youth subcultures such as mods and skinheads focused on the origin and meaning of their norms and values and the effects of the labelling of these groups by the police and media.

By the 1990s a number of problems with these approaches had been identified. Firstly, it seemed that the period of specific subcultures was over. Muggleton (2000) suggested that in the postmodern world there were no subcultures anymore, rather a variety of styles from which individuals could pick and choose. Secondly, it was argued that subcultures had never been as 'fixed' as the research had implied. There was great diversity within groups, groups overlapped, people moved between groups, there were less committed 'members' on the fringes and so on.

Hodkinson takes issue with the postmodernist view that subcultures have been replaced by styles. He is interested in what Goths have in common, regardless of where they are because, he argues, this is a subculture which is not limited to particular places.

He identifies four criteria that distinguish a genuine subculture:

- **Consistent distinctiveness:** while there will be some internal diversity, a subculture will have a distinctive set of shared values which continues fairly consistently over time.
- **Identity:** do the participants share a sense of group identity, of being 'us' rather than 'them'?
- **Commitment:** how far does participation influence the daily lives of participants, with activities related to participation taking up a substantial part of their free time?
- **Autonomy:** although shaped to a degree by the media and consumer

goods, a subculture is sustained by activities undertaken by participants (for example, running record labels, fanzines and websites).

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This research makes an important contribution to the continuing debates on youth styles, identities and subcultures. Hodkinson makes a convincing case from the categorization of Goth as a specific subculture. Therefore at least one subculture existed in Britain in the late 1990s at a time when other commentators and researchers were suggesting that the era of 'spectacular' subcultures was over.

Other writers on subculture in the same period, such as Sarah Thornton in *Club Cultures* (1995), stressed the role of the media and consumer industries in shaping subcultures. Hodkinson shows the central importance of participants in the subculture, through their organizing of events, producing fanzines, websites and so on.

FIND OUT MORE

Hodkinson, P. (2002) *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. Oxford: Berg

Muggleton, D. (2000) *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford: Berg

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METHODS

Hodkinson's research was ethnographic, using a variety of mainly qualitative methods including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, although he also used a multiple-choice questionnaire.

Hodkinson describes himself as a critical insider. He says that he was an 'enthusiastic participant in the Goth scene' from the early 1990s. This allowed him easier access to Goths and Goth events around the country. It is unlikely that an 'outsider' researcher could have gained as much of an insight into Goths as Hodkinson was able to. Hodkinson was clearly, to other Goths, not just adopting the style for the purpose of the research; in fact, his participation in the Goth scene became more intense because of the needs of the research. However, Hodkinson says that he had to remember to be 'critical' as well as an 'insider'; he had to step back to assess his role and his findings.

Hodkinson interviewed 72 individuals in 56 interviews. Among those interviewed were DJs, event promoters, fanzine editors and band members. The interviews were face to face except for four conducted by post and five by e-mail. Hodkinson was able to use his status as an insider to make the respondents feel at ease and allow the interviews to take the form of open, flowing conversation.

The questionnaire was given to a sample of 112 people at the Whitby Gothic Weekend in October 1997. As well as asking about occupation, ethnicity, relationships and children, Hodkinson asked about what they liked about the Whitby Gothic Weekend, their attendance at Goth events, the most important aspects of the Goth scene and where they bought music, clothes and accessories.

EVALUATION

Hodkinson's enthusiasm for Goth may lead us to question his objectivity, despite his claim to take the role of a 'critical insider'. However, the extent of his immersion in the research and his use of a combination of methods mean that he succeeds in giving us a detailed account of British Goth style in the late 1990s.

KEY FINDINGS

Despite the view that there are now a range of 'pick and mix' styles in the postmodern period, Hodkinson identifies Goths as a distinct subculture as he finds that they meet the criteria set out above.

Consistent distinctiveness

Although Hodkinson found a diversity of styles within the Goth scene he argues that Goths have a style which remains distinctive.

Goth had its origins in the post-punk style of Siouxsie and the Banshees and Bauhaus in the late 1970s. The term 'Goth' was used by the music press and its use gave a sense of permanence to the style, helping to 'fix' key themes. These themes have survived although the details have changed.

One key theme has been the sombre and macabre, shown in the dominance of black in clothing and an interest in vampire fiction and media. However, by the late 1990s this theme had evolved, with an acceptance of bright colours and piercings for both sexes. There was also more wearing of skirts, fishnet tights and mesh tops, providing a visual link to the fetish scene.

Despite the outsider view of the Goth scene as being obsessed with the dark and the macabre, the general outlook of Goths is not characterized by gloom and depression. In fact, Goths see this as a misleading stereotype held by outsiders.

Hodkinson found there was an unusually high acceptance of non-hetero sexualities among Goths. Goths of the same sex kissing or holding hands attracted little attention, and there was some open expression of bisexuality, with many saying they were attracted to Goths of both sexes.

One female respondent said in interview:

'They (male Goths) can actually get closer to another male. They wouldn't feel ashamed of hugging another man or crying on his shoulder or something like that whereas if they were more macho then perhaps "huh, you poof, you can't hold my hand" or you know.'

Identity

The visual distinctiveness of Goths made it easy for Goths to recognize other Goths and to be recognized as Goths, and as clearly different from outsiders. Some respondents, however, emphasized their individuality and were hesitant about group identity. Even these, however, at some point in the interview expressed feelings of identification and similarity, such as this respondent:

'Goth is a tribe... it's just a group of people that get together and say... "we have something in common – we have how we dress, how we look, how we feel and the kind of people we're interested in, in common."'

Hodkinson discusses other aspects of the identity of participants, using data from his questionnaire, such as ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and sexuality. For many respondents, being a Goth was a very important part of their identity. One respondent put it like this:

'It is the most important thing in my life, there's no doubt about it, it is the most important thing in my life – I couldn't fathom existing without it at all.'

Commitment

For many respondents, participation in subcultural events (for example, specialist Goth club and pub nights) was a major activity. These served to strengthen commitment to the Goth subculture as they involve socializing with other Goths rather than outsiders. The social rewards involved often meant a deep and long term commitment, rather than the shallow, short term adoption of a style.

Many Goths also attended annual or biannual festivals and other events that meant traveling outside their local area. Of the questionnaire respondents (contacted at such a festival) the vast majority had traveled to a previous Goth event that year and 36% said they had traveled to ten or more events.

Autonomy

Hodkinson shows how participants took an increasingly important and creative part in shaping Goth subculture in the 1990s. There were some successful Goth businesses, such as Nightbreed Recordings mail order service, and some participants were making a reasonable living from their activities.

Autonomy also shows in the shopping habits of Goths, buying from specialist shops and providers in order to acquire subcultural capital. This subcultural media – the Goths' own fanzines, flyers, posters and web sites – promoted the subculture and created links between Goths in different places.