

ESSAY

*A critical examination of gender
relations within Goth subculture*

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inter 2009, CHROME, Canberra, Australia, a blend of 'darkwave' EBM (electronic body music) resounds from the club's speaker system. Black-clad dark outlines have formed on the dance floor beside the bar, gently fluctuating, writhing, and drifting to the industrial reverberations. The mysterious entourage flaunt a mixture of bulky leather boots, tight-fitting bondage wear, kilts, silky flowing evening gowns, capes, corsetry, and the odd fetish gear. The sheer volume of identities on display seems overwhelming: of the gender binaries both extremes of hyper-masculinities and -femininities are represented with a vast variation of graded representations between them. However apparent also is small curious overlap that seems neither distinctly masculine nor feminine. What could appear to outsiders as an odd, clandestine group of adolescent misfits is the monthly popular goth event of Canberra city, a type of gathering that occurs in commonality weekly across the world.

The eccentric diversity and representation of gender within the Goth or Gothic subculture, is often described by its participants as an "open", "liberating" (Brill, 2008, pp. 9–10; Wilkins, 2004, p. 328) environment of possible gender egalitarianism, or at the least tolerance (Holmes, 1997) in contrast to a larger heteronormative mainstream society. While heterosexuality is prevalent, this promise provides a tolerant space for sexual minorities to 'come out'. Although heterosexual, Goths that define themselves as such are also deviant through their gender performativity (Butler, 1990) from the greater heteronormative. This is displayed insofar by the prized subcultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in flamboyant styling—as epitomised by Goth androgyny—in not only women but also men, which permits and even encourages men to 'feminise' themselves. Meanwhile this emphasis on style provides a liberation to women who shed the negative stigma associated in expressing a form of hyper-femininity that is oft met with degradation in mainstream society. However, this progressive outlook has its limitations whose foundation lie with the gendered rules of subcultural capital. Gender relations within the subculture are both progressive and reactionary—and at times even transgressive—however this imbalance permits elements of heteronormativity to be replicated within Goth, and thus the merits of the promise of liberation remain deeply rooted in these relations and the use of subcultural capital.

Macdonald (2001) and Leblanc (2002), among others, have performed numerous studies on the punk and graffiti subcultures pronouncing them as 'heterosexualist'. Similarly Anderson's (1999) analysis of the construction of gender within the subculture of the emerging sport of snowboarding further illustrated the process of legitimised male dominance within 'emphasised heterosexuality'. Conversely Brill notes "Goth as more gender-balanced subculture" that "promotes an ideology or fantasy of genderlessness, cherishing femininity and male androgyny" (Brill, 2008, p. 99). This is permeated by the strong focus on aestheticisation of both sexes, particularly in fashion and style. Participants of Goth are renown for their eroticised black clothing, long dark hair, piercings, tattoos and strongly defined white complexions. Goth dress

styles draw heavily from Elizabethan and Victorian periods and modern adaptations thereof are commonly combined with fetish, BDSM, steampunk, and cyber fashions and related paraphernalia (Grunenberg, 1997). Further, the use of elaborate makeup by female and male members is common and widely accepted (fig. 1). Goth styles nevertheless differ across gendered lines, with the curious fusion that is neither, androgyny. Hyper-masculine attires often feature leather pants, kilts or skirts, large metal-plated boots, band t-shirts or combat shirts all often adorned with iconic buckles, chains and other ‘masculine’ paraphernalia (fig. 2). Representative hyper-feminine garments include high-heel or platform shoes, stockings, petticoats, dresses, gowns, corsetry, often combined and adorned with matching chokers, rings, gloves, arm-warmers, and further accessories—all indicative of the classic femme fatale, with a dark spin (fig. 3). There are adaptations and alterations to this style, notably the *goth lolita* which draws heavily on the Victorian and Rococo period and its children’s wear and has gained particular prominence in Japan (fig. 4). These and the many gradations of style between hyper-masculine and -feminine extremes (fig. 5), as well as the styles of androgyny all serve to deliver a form of *corporeal capital* (Skeggs, 1997) which is utilised within the heterosexual courtship arena and as a form of status attainment.

This weight and attention to style offers up a progressive form of corporeal capital. Both women and men can and are admired for their stylistic exuberance which could be received as either negatively ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ as in the case of feminine or androgynous males (fig. 6) under the gaze of male (and to some extent female) of the mainstream heteronormative society, whilst hyper-feminine women report feelings of safety and ease within the Goth scene whereas they may be perceived as slovenly and promiscuous (e.g. ‘slut’, ‘whore’, ‘tramp’) by the mainstream and its gaze. Active, self-determined female sexuality is celebrated insofar as a ‘natural entitlement by most women’ such that “the widespread double standards of male and female sexual behaviour do not seem to apply”. Brill goes on to highlight that sexual promiscuity does not tarnish women, that a “‘slutty’ reputation can in fact work to enhance rather than lessen the status of the female Goth” (Brill, 2008, p. 102). Within Goth the open ability for men to feminise themselves and women to hyper-feminise themselves through dress offer safe avenues for personal gender experimentation and identification whilst challenging many gender norms that are institutionalised in greater mainstream society.

However the ‘fantasy of genderlessness, cherishing femininity and male androgyny’ encounters limitations within Goth. Brill aptly observes Goth as a “heterosexually gendered space” wherein “traditional masculine poses like macho bearing and physical violence are normally outlawed” and frowned upon, yet the Goth space replicates the heteronormative “turf where men ‘fight’ for territory and women”, although more subtly (ibid., p. 100). Through interviews she indicates the existence competition in courtship, and to a lesser extent social status attainment. Her interviewees—one male, one female respectively—both commented on the difficulty

in entering a foreign Goth scene, as male and female, raising common concerns of isolation by the same-sex; both saw same-sex new arrivals as potential competition. This was further highlighted by a later interview conducted by Brill with a lesbian couple who described the relations as “totally heterosexual” in regards to which party makes the opening advances and typify the scene as “resolutely heterosexual” that “promote very traditional gender roles regarding eroticism and seduction” (ibid., p. 100).

Not unlike that of mainstream society, a different form of capital may also be called upon for status attainment and exploitation in the courtship arena. Within the scene organisers of events, DJs, scene bar staff, or even long upstanding members are received with respect and admiration. This *social capital* (Bourdieu, 1984) can be enacted as a form of desirability and is often used by male elder individuals of the scene who may lack youthful aspects of idealised Goth beauty, particularly to attract a cohort of younger and/or newcomer females. Brill coins these ‘Übergoths’ and notes the strange lack of female Übergoths who utilise the social capital. It seems again not unlike mainstream society—even though Goth does feature a larger female participation in production and organisation in contrast to other music-based subcultures (Brill, 2008, p. 108)—that most of the power in Goth is held by males. Females may see elder Goths in their higher social standing as a form of enhancing their status—akin to ‘marrying up’. This ability is however thus reserved for the most part to men—referred to by Brill as ‘sugar-daddies’—and consequently solidifies the prime means of status attainment of women heterosexually to traditionally defined feminine qualities of youthfulness and physical beauty.

As a heterosexually defined courtship arena whose females celebrate male androgyny, androgyny remains principally a male endeavour and hyper-feminisation is coaxed and normalised by heteronormative essentialism. This results in a form of beauty contest in which the highest level of corporeal capital is assigned the objective amongst women who then compete amongst one another for this (heteronormatively-defined) status. Men, with their dominant access to social capital can appear “somehow ‘beyond the competition’ ... above mundane things like competition” (ibid., p. 111).

It would be a generalist view to hold that all women or men conform to the strictly heteronormative gender relations described, as this is simply not the case. Some women may for instance not feel obligated to endlessly compete for corporeal capital for use within the heterosexual courtship arena, discovering means of attaining social capital—do women locate power by other means? Similarly cliques and individuals of other or more complex sexualities may negate or transgress the heteronormative interactions of the courtship arena—enter LGBT (e.g. queer theory) and BDSM. (e.g. interactions with Goth male submissives or Goth female dommes)—but as such the imbalance to participate, recognise, and draw upon gained social capital between men and women within Goth continues to permeate an albeit black-clad heteronormative courting arena and possibly other spaces within Goth.



Fig. 1 *Exquisite makeup on a male goth*

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Fig. 2 *Andy LaPlegua of Combichrist; male hyper-masculine goth/punk style*

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Fig. 3 *Female hyper-feminine goth style*

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Fig. 4 *Female hyper-feminine goth lolita style*

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Fig. 5 *Aristocrat-like goth style*

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Fig. 6 *Male androgyny*

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