



Brief research report

## Negative body image and eating disorder symptomatology among young women identifying with goth subculture

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## ABSTRACT

The present study compared the rates of negative body image and risk for disordered eating in young women who identify as part of goth subculture and a matched sample. Participants were 80 women who identified as part of goth subculture and a matched sample of 82 women from London, United Kingdom. Participants completed measures of self-ideal body size discrepancy, body appreciation, appearance investment, and eating disorder symptomatology. Between-group comparisons indicated that goth women reported significantly higher drive for thinness ( $d=0.51$ ), body dissatisfaction ( $d=0.62$ ), and dysfunctional appearance investment ( $d=0.52$ ), as well as lower body appreciation ( $d=0.55$ ), than the matched sample. Heightened expectations about appearance and self-presentation, alongside appearance competitiveness, may result in more negative body image and disordered eating in young women who identify with goth subculture, but further research is necessary on this under-studied youth subculture.

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### 1. Introduction

Alternative youth subculture is a broad term used to define a strong sense of collective identity and a set of group-specific values and tastes. One group that identifies under such an “alternative” umbrella is goths. Although goth subculture includes a range of styles and a degree of diversity, scholars have identified a number of social norms typically associated with being a goth, including a distinctive appearance and associated tastes in music and aesthetics (Hodkinson, 2002). Goth subculture is sometimes described as a rebellion against the behavioural constraints and expectations of mainstream self-presentation and appearance, sexuality, and emotion (Wilkins, 2008). Through a reclamation of marginalisation, goth subculture may allow some individuals to gain a sense of identity through collectivity and a repudiation of humiliation and invisibility (Goulding & Saren, 2009; Wilkins, 2008).

Issues of body image and disordered eating are worthy of investigation within goth subculture for several reasons. First, it has been noted that everyday goth participation for young women includes transgressive forms of stylistic displays and negotiations of established understandings of appearance vis-à-vis “dark fem-

inity” (particularly slimness, tight clothing, and make-up; Brill, 2008). Such expectations can be used to critique mainstream culture and explore alternative subjectivities (Wilkins, 2004), but they may also stimulate dysfunctional cognitions about the importance of appearance and contribute to risk for negative body image and eating disorders. Moreover, Hodkinson (2011) has written about the need to compete for attention and status through subcultural appearance within the goth community, particularly among younger members, which requires that extensive energy and time be spent on ongoing enhancement of personal appearance. Such appearance competitiveness, in combination with the negotiation of rules and criteria of subcultural status, may lead to greater perceived importance of appearance, even to the point of such cognitions becoming dysfunctional.

The notion of personal crisis that has been identified as being central to identity in contemporary goth culture (Thomas, 2009) may also contribute to negative body image. This sense of crisis is reflected in goth subculture’s concern with the body, particularly as a site through which individuals can exert control through body modification or reshaping. In other words, identification with goth subculture may promote attitudes about the body that lead to a heightened pursuit of subcultural appearance goals (e.g., thinness), which in turn increase the risk of negative body image and disordered eating. Separately, goths may also experience heightened outsider judgements, as evidenced by the discrimination, prejudice, and targeted violence aimed at goths as a result of their

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appearance (Fauquet-Alekhine, 2016; Garland, 2010; Garland & Hodgkinson, 2015). Such experiences of targeted victimisation may have a detrimental effect on body image (e.g., by shifting attention away from the body's functionality towards a heightened focus on appearance).

In light of these issues, some scholars have called for greater attention to corporeal issues within goth subculture (Duggan, Heath, & Hu, 2015). In response to this call, the present study compared corporeal factors between young women who identify with goth subculture and a control sample matched on key demographics (age, ethnicity, and body mass index [BMI]). More specifically, the samples were compared on measures of body image (body appreciation, self-ideal body size discrepancy, investment in appearance) and eating disorder symptomatology. Although previous studies have not specifically focused on body and disordered eating in goths, it was hypothesised that goths would have significantly greater negative body image and disordered eating than the control sample.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

**2.1.1. Goths.** The index cases consisted of 80 women who identified with goth subculture and recruited from the London Borough of Camden, an area associated with alternative subcultures. Participants in this group ranged in age from 18 to 29 years ( $M=20.16$ ,  $SD=2.56$ ) and in self-reported BMI from 14.32 to 32.03 kg/m<sup>2</sup> ( $M=21.91$ ,  $SD=4.30$ ). The majority of this sample self-reported as being of British White ancestry (88.8%), while 5.0% were of African Caribbean descent, 5.0% of mixed ancestry, and 1.2% of Asian descent.

**2.1.2. Control sample.** The control sample consisted of 82 women recruited from the community in the London Borough of Camden. Participants in this group ranged in age from 18 to 32 years ( $M=20.56$ ,  $SD=2.51$ ) and in self-reported BMI from 14.77 to 30.10 kg/m<sup>2</sup> ( $M=23.01$ ,  $SD=3.97$ ). Most participants in this sample were of British White ancestry (87.8%), while others were of African Caribbean descent (4.9%), Asian descent (3.7%), or mixed descent (3.7%).

### 2.2. Measures

**2.2.1. Risk factors for eating disorders.** Participants completed the Eating Disorders Inventory-3 (EDI-3; Garner, 2004), a self-report questionnaire widely used to assess risk factors for eating disorders. The EDI-3 consists of three subscales: drive for thinness (EDI-DT; 7 items), body dissatisfaction (EDI-BD; 9 items), and bulimia symptoms (EDI-BS; 7 items). Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*) and subscale scores were computed as the mean of items associated with each factor (higher scores reflect greater incidence of eating disorder symptomatology). These subscales of the EDI-3 have good patterns of factorial, convergent, and discriminant validity (Clausen, Rosenvinge, Friberg, & Rokkedal, 2011; Garner, 2004). In the present study, internal consistency coefficients for all three subscales were acceptable for both the goth (Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq .86$ ) and control groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq .84$ ).

**2.2.2. Body size discrepancy.** Self-ideal body size discrepancy was measured using the Photographic Figure Rating Scale (PFRS; Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tov  e, 2008), which presents participants with 10 photographic images of women ranging in body size from emaciated to obese. Participants were asked to select the figure that most closely matched their own body size and the figure

they would most like to possess in terms of body size, with ratings made on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*Figure with the lowest BMI*) to 10 (*Figure with the highest BMI*). A measure of body size discrepancy was computed as the difference between unsigned (absolute) current and ideal ratings (Swami et al., 2012). Previous work has shown that the PFRS has good psychometric properties, including indices of convergent validity and test-retest reliability up to 3 weeks (Swami et al., 2008, 2012).

**2.2.3. Body appreciation.** Participants completed the 10-item Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015), that assesses acceptance of one's body, respect and care for one's body, and protection of one's body from unrealistic beauty standards. All items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*), and an overall score was computed as the mean of all items (higher scores reflect greater body appreciation). The psychometric properties of the BAS-2, including its internal consistency, test-retest reliability after 3 weeks, and validity, have been upheld in college and community samples of women (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). In the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was .94 in goths and .95 in the control sample.

**2.2.4. Investment in appearance.** The Appearance Schemas Inventory-Revised (ASI-R; Cash, Melnyk, & Hrabosky, 2004) was used to measure psychological investment in appearance. This is a 20-item scale that measures the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of their physical appearance, which they consider influential in social and emotional experiences (Self-Evaluative Salience; 12 items) and the extent to which individuals attend to their appearance and engage in appearance-management behaviours (Motivational Salience; 8 items). All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) and subscale scores were computed as the mean of items associated with each factor. Higher scores on both subscales are reflective of greater investment in appearance. The ASI-R has good patterns of construct and convergent validity (Cash, Melnyk et al., 2004). In the present study, internal consistency coefficients for both subscales were acceptable for both the goth (Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq .82$ ) and control groups (Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq .85$ ).

**2.2.5. Goth identity.** As a validity check, participants were asked to respond to the item "Being a goth is an important part of my identity" on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Definitely agree*).

**2.2.6. Demographics.** Participants were asked to provide their demographic details consisting of age, ethnicity, height, and weight. Self-reported BMI was calculated as kg/m<sup>2</sup>.

### 2.3. Procedure

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. Recruitment of participants to the goth subsample took place between October 2015 and January 2016, and was conducted by two research assistants who identified as part of the goth subculture. The researchers directly approached potential participants in sites of congregative activities in the London Borough of Camden. Participants who verbally reported that they matched inclusion criteria (of adult age, identify as part of goth subculture, residing in the UK) were invited to participate in a study about body image. Once a sufficiently large sample of goths had been recruited, a third researcher who did not identify as part of the goth subculture recruited age-, ethnicity-, and BMI-matched non-goths from similar sites of congregative activities in the London Borough of Camden between January and March 2016. In all cases, participants completed the questionnaire individually at a booth

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