**Targeted Harassment, Subcultural Identity and the Embrace of Difference: A Case Study**

**Abstract**

This paper examines the significance of experiences and understandings of targeted harassment to the identities of youth subcultural participants, through case study research on goths. It does so against a context of considerable recent public discussion about the victimisation of alternative subcultures and a surprising scarcity of academic research on the subject. The analysis presented indicates that, although individual direct experiences are diverse, the spectre of harassment can form an ever-present accompaniment to subcultural life, even for those who have never been seriously targeted. As such, it forms part of what it is to be a subcultural participant and comprises significant common ground with other members. Drawing upon classic and more recent understandings of how subcultural groups respond to broader forms of outside hostility, we show how the shared experience of feeling targeted for harassment tied in with a broader subcultural discourse of being stigmatised by a perceived ‘normal’ society. The role of harassment as part of this, we argue, contributed to the strength with which subcultural identities were felt and to a positive embrace of otherness.

**Keywords**

Subculture; youth culture; harassment; abuse; violence; goth

**Introduction**

Having gone rather unnoticed for many years, public harassment and violence against alternative subcultural participants has been thrust into UK public debate following the murder of twenty year old Sophie Lancaster in 2007 – a crime widely believed to have been motivated by hostility towards the goth appearance of Lancaster and her boyfriend. The case prompted extensive media coverage, as did an announcement by a prominent UK regional police force, in 2013, that, following campaigning led by Lancaster’s mother, it would henceforth be recording attacks on members of alternative subcultures as hate crimes. While the severity of the Lancaster incident was unusual, the coverage and debate that ensued have drawn attention to the broader and more routine forms of harassment and violence that goths, punks, skaters, metallers and others are subjected to.

It is hardly surprising that significant media coverage and public awareness of such harassment would ensue only in the event of so high profile a case. More remarkable is the sparse attention afforded to its nature and significance among the numerous sociological studies of youth music and style subcultures. For it will be our contention in this paper that, whilst the frequency and severity of incidents may vary, targeted public harassment can form an integral part of what it is to be involved in a spectacular subculture. We also show how such harassment is often understood by participants as part of a broader societal hostility to which they are subject and how, as such, it plays a role in defining and strengthening group identification and in contributing to a collective embrace of otherness.

Importantly, our concern in this piece, centred on qualitative interviews with twenty-one individuals connected to the goth scene, is *not* with on-going debates about whether harassment against subcultural participants should be included under the category of hate crime, though we have discussed this elsewhere (see Garland and Hodkinson 2014a, 2014b). Neither does this article centre on the Lancaster case itself or the campaign that followed. Our emphasis here is on the sociological significance of everyday public harassment for the development and playing out of subcultural lives and identities. We begin with an examination of existing literature on subcultures, violence and societal hostility, placing emphasis on the connections that might be drawn between research on direct experiences of harassment and broader understandings of the role of societal hostility in the development of subcultural identities. Having outlined our case study and methodological approach, we go on to show how our data indicate that, in spite of diversity with respect to respondents’ direct experiences, the collective experience of vulnerability to harassment formed an ongoing accompaniment to subcultural life and contributed to the strengthening of a subcultural identity vested in otherness.

**Harassment, Violence and Subcultures**

The involvement of youth subcultural participants in hostility or conflict is a familiar feature of subcultural studies. Some of the best known work of the Chicago tradition centres upon subcultural violence, whether in the form of Frederic Thrasher’s exposition of the hostilities and territoriality of Chicago’s gangs (1927) or William Foote Whytes’ ethnography of Italian ‘corner boys’ in Boston slums (1943). Violence among ‘spectacular’ subcultures, centred upon strikingly distinctive style and music (Hebdige 1979; Hodkinson 2012), is well-documented too, not least in Rock and Stan Cohen’s (1970) discussion of Teddy Boy culture, Cohen’s (1972) interrogation of the societal reaction to hostilities involving UK mods and rockers and, at various points in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, even if the core of the Centre’s analysis of the UK’s post-war style subcultures concerned itself more with symbolic forms of class conflict. Phil Cohen (1972), for example, regards hostilities between subcultures (greasers versus skinheads, mods versus rockers) as a displacement of generational tensions, while Jon Clarke (1976a) refers to the specific importance of ‘trouble’ – including ‘paki-’ and ‘queer-’ bashing – to skinhead culture’s embrace of lumpen white masculinity, and Dick Hebdige alludes to the importance of conflict as part of mod night-life (1976).

Yet references to targeted harassment or violence *against* largely or wholly non-violent subcultural participants are less common. Tony Jefferson’s emphasis on the sensitivity, or ‘touchiness’ of teddy boys to insulting comments from passers-by comes the closest within the CCCS’ work to thinking about being abused as an integral part of subcultural experience (1976). Jefferson usefully suggests that such sensitivity reflects the fragile structural identities and backgrounds represented by Teddy Boy style and its status as ‘the only reality or space on which they had any hold’, while describing how outside hostility prompted responses in defence of subcultural resolve and ‘group-mindedness’ (ibid.: 82). Nevertheless, Jefferson is clear that teddy boys were probably as likely to perpetrate violence or abuse as to be on the receiving end.

Subsequently, the targeted harassment of subcultural participants continues to be largely absent from literature in the area. Studies by Hodkinson (2002) and Dunja Brill (2008) do indicate that goths tend to be subject to abuse from passers-by, hinting at the role of such experiences in helping to construct subcultural identity, but neither investigate in detail. Greater depth is provided, however, in Lauraine Leblanc’s study of female punks in the US and Canada (2008), which includes a chapter focused on the kinds of abuse and violence suffered by her respondents at the hands of members of the public. Leblanc shows that targeted harassment, from intrusive stares to physical attack, was an everyday occurrence, to the extent that her respondents had developed a range of differing coping strategies, including ignoring or walking away, humorous retorts and, occasionally, responding with their own insults. Leblanc also demonstrates how female punks were subject to gendered abuse related either to their perceived adoption of a masculine style or, conversely, their wearing of clothing perceived as sexually explicit (also see Blackman 1997).

Leblanc’s study provides valuable insight into the kinds of abuse faced by punks and makes a compelling argument that such harassment should be taken more seriously by police and law makers. What is less detailed in the account, and what we hope to develop in the current article, is an analysis of the ways experiences of harassment feed into and inform subcultural identities. Leblanc offers some useful starting points, through indicating that we might think about public harassment as forming part of the general relationship between subcultural groupings and the broader society of which they are a part – a relationship often characterised, she argues, by the stigmatisation of the former by the latter. Though she does not really develop this in relation to the accounts of her respondents, Leblanc suggests that, through thinking of harassment in this way, we might explore its significance for subcultural identities through asking, with reference to social reaction subculture theories, whether harassment might play a role in ‘consolidating a subculture, establishing its boundaries and compelling its members’ commitment’ (2008: 169).

**Subcultures and Negative Social Reactions**

Sure enough, while research on the person-to-person harassment faced by subculture participants is rare, discussion of the role played by broader societal hostility in the development of subcultural identities is commonplace. While much of his attention is on explaining the initial formation of subcultures as a reaction to participants’ lack of status in dominant society, Albert Cohen’s (1955) seminal introduction to ‘Delinquent Boys’ goes on to detail the way that hostile social reactions elicited by subcultures prompt such groups to become more committed, bounded, oppositional and mutually dependent. Becker’s (1964) transactional theory of deviance, meanwhile, places more detailed emphasis on the broader labelling of deviance by dominant society, and the role of this as part of a sequential process through which subcultural identities, values and meanings become shaped. As part of this, subcultures develop self-justifying rationales that legitimate subcultural practices and repudiate external society. Such ideas are taken further, in the UK, by Jock Young (1971\*\*) in relation to the ways the deviant behaviour of marijuana users were ‘amplified’ as a result of their stigmatisation by dominant institutions, and by Stanley Cohen (1972) with respect to the development of public moral panics, driven by the press, that demonised mods and rockers. Much of Stan Cohen’s focus is on interrogating the content and processes of the social reaction itself but he also outlines its role in helping to shape, reinforce and amplify the subcultures involved. Although personal harassment is not specifically their focus, then, these classic understandings indicate that societal hostility plays an important role in defining the subcultural experience, strengthening identity and eliciting defiance (Fine and Kleinman 1979).

Traces of this transactional understanding of subcultures also can be found in the work of the CCCS, even though the primary concerns of their class-centred approach lie elsewhere. As Shane Blackman (2005; 2014) shows, Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts (1976) are critical of Albert Cohen’s understanding of the origins of subcultures, distrusting the psychological/functionalist roots of an account that centred on the notion of ‘reaction-formation’ – psychological compensation for an inability to succeed on dominant terms. Yet this does not prevent references within CCCS work to the implications of the societal hostility subcultures receive once they have emerged. With an apparent nod towards social reaction theories, Jon Clarke ponders whether negative societal reactions result in intensified subcultural commitment and solidarity:

…such [negative social] reactions generated among different groups, by the existence of an identifiable style, must have consequences for the group’s own position… Whether this intensifies their commitment towards greater group solidarity or develops that to a new level, or whether, finally, social reaction is successful in dissuading members so identified from their intentions, is an empirical question to be established more precisely (1976b: 184).

Clarke goes on to indicate specifically that skinhead identities were strengthened as a result of their exclusion and stigmatisation by facets of dominant culture (dancehall proprietors, police) regarded by participants as ‘people on our backs’ (ibid.). We have already noted, meanwhile, Jefferson’s attention to the strengthening of teddy boy identities as a result of hostility to their dress (1976).

More recent work, too, has shown how, in spite of question marks against some versions of social reaction theory (see Blackman 2014), the thrust of such theories with respect to interplay between negative social reactions and the subcultural experience has retained purchase. Bruce Friesen’s (1990) examination of the media stigmatisation of heavy metal fans in the 1980s, for example, notes that, while metallers simultaneously revelled in and resented different aspects of their stigmatisation, the social reaction appeared to encourage self-identification as deviant – a salient point for the current study. Similarly, Donna Gaines’ (1990) study of metal-oriented teenagers in a New Jersey suburban town attends, amongst other things, to the way subculturally-inflected youth were encouraged to play out the role of outcasts assigned to them through their stigmatisation by a conservative community.

Sarah Thornton’s seminal analysis of 1990s club culture, meanwhile, draws heavily upon Becker and Stan Cohen in the attention it devotes to the role of press hostility in the defining and affirming of rave cultural identities (1995). Crucially, though, Thornton develops a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between social reaction and subculture. In her account, mass media hostility interacts with organised forms of subcultural communication via a range of niche and micro media outlets purporting to speak to and for subcultural participants. Such outlets form intermediaries in the strengthening of subcultural identities in response to mainstream negativity, a point we shall turn to later in relation to our own research (also see McRobbie and Thornton 1995). Similarly, Andy Brown’s recent examination of moral panics against heavy metal in the 1980s and emo culture in the 2000s shows how, in the latter case, the subculture utilised specialist media channels to organise opposition to negative media coverage and reaffirm subcultural identities in the face of stigmatisation (Brown 2011).

Williams (2012\*\*), meanwhile, draws upon a range of studies to show how young people exhibiting alternative styles continue to be branded as folk devils by media, politicians, law enforcement and public health officials. Citing a case study by Rosenbaum and Prinsky (1991), he refers to a local government campaign against punk and heavy metal subcultures in Orange County that specified a range of ‘warning signs’ – primarily related to style and clothing – for parents to look out for. Drawing on Thornton’s developments of the work of Becker and Stan Cohen, Williams underlines the way that complex interactions between mainstream stigmatisation and subcultural forms of media discourse can give rise to ‘objective’ impacts on the conditions in which subcultures find themselves and ‘subjective’ implications for the lived experiences and identities of participants.

As we have noted, the societal hostility referred to in these studies tends not to concern direct harassment but, rather, the workings of institutional manifestations of ‘dominant culture’ such as media, the police or politicians. Following the lead of Leblanc (2008), we seek in what follows to explore the harassment and abuse of subcultural participants in public places as a particular example of societal hostility and attend to its significance for the subcultural experience. More specifically, we examine the connections often drawn by respondents between specific incidents of harassment and a broader sense of being stigmatised and marginalised. In so doing, we connect our data on harassment with inferences from classic and recent literature focused on negative societal reactions to subcultures. We establish that experiences and expectations of hostility formed an integral feature of the subcultural experience that fed into the strengthening of identity and contributed to a defiant collective embrace of otherness.

**Goth Culture**

Having emerged in the 1980s as a dark-themed subculture based around sombre, macabre forms of music and an androgynous style centred upon black clothes and hair, pale made-up faces and particular style of jewellery and body adornment, the goth scene has now endured for over three decades (see Hodkinson 2002; Baddeley 2002\*\*; Spooner 2006; Brill 2008; Haenfler 2012\*\*). Along the way, it has developed and drawn upon a range of related styles as well as encompassing a number of different variations and sub-styles, from electronic-oriented so-called ‘cybergoths’ to newer generations of ‘emos’, adorned with goth-themed styles and identities but embracing music with its roots – at least partially – in hardcore punk. More generally, as well as being a distinct subcultural community in its own right with a strong, defiant and often enduring sense of identity and a distinct set of tastes and values (Hodkinson 2002), goth has also tended to form one part of a broader umbrella of ‘alternative culture’ that also includes punks, metallers and some variants of indie music amongst others. Over the years, goths often have shared pubs and clubs with these other alternative scenes, as well as some elements of style such as piercings, tattoos and, often, social connections of one kind or another (Hodkinson 2002). Importantly, while the current study centres on goths, our sample reflects these connections, including individuals differently situated within or connected to the scene and some who associated with goths but who had come to identify more strongly with related forms of music or style within the alternative umbrella, including emo and metal cultures.

As indicated in the section above, goths have not always been regarded positively within public debate. Following the Columbine School shootings in 1999 and a handful of other isolated incidents of violence or self-harm involving individuals portrayed as goths, headlines have sometimes focused on the possibility that the subculture might either attract or cultivate individuals who are violent or dangerous – either to others or themselves (see Hodkinson 2002; Williams 2012; Brown 2011). For Ross Haenfler (2012), goth culture is particularly notable for the way it has been stigmatised by media and politicians and management of this stigma forms an important feature of subcultural life for goths, who - he argues - typically become used to feeling like outsiders. Some qualitative academic studies, meanwhile, have made brief reference to experiences of public harassment (Hodkinson 2002; Brill 2008) among goths while recent quantitative work has indicated a high propensity to be the victim of bullying (Minton 2012) or assault (Young 2013) among participants, something consistent with more anecdotal accounts of such harassment in recent media coverage (see Garland 2010). In the pages that follow, we explore experiences and understandings of harassment in greater depth and draw connections between such experiences and a broader sense of societal stigmatisation felt by many participants.

**Methodology**

The research consisted of 21 in-depth interviews carried out between January and August 2013. Participants were recruited through snowballing from existing contacts of Hodkinson, contacting the organisers of two goth/alternative university societies and posting calls for respondents on several social networking site pages and forums, including a forum for the Sophie Lancaster Foundation – a campaign group set up following the murder of Lancaster – which is subscribed to by over 70,000 people, most of whom are participants of the goth scene and related alternative subcultures. These social networking site posts resulted in approximately 50 volunteers, something that, in itself, may be taken to indicate the importance of the subject matter for many subcultural participants. However, through recruiting respondents via the variety of techniques and sources outlined, rather than selecting only from the responses to any particular advertisement, we were able to develop a sample that was diverse and not exclusively reliant upon those willing to respond to an advertisement or indeed those with an unusual level of interest in questions of harassment (see Ritchie et al 2014).

The approach taken to establishing contact with respondents, then, centred on a desire to include a broad a range of people and experiences. Similarly participants were selected from the range of volunteers generated with a view to maximising the diversity of the sample – notably with respect to gender, age, location and background, although practical factors, including availability and proximity to locations reachable by the researchers, also played a role. In total, eight men and thirteen women were interviewed and, while most were in their twenties, participant age ranged from 19 to 53. Consistent with the broader profile of the goth scene all participants were white and most (though not all) had middle class backgrounds. The sample included individuals from a variety of locations in England, including the North-West, North-East, Midlands and South-East of the country, and who lived in a range of different types of conurbation, from large cities to small towns or villages. Participants were told – through initial communication and a more detailed information sheet – that the aim of the project was to understand experiences of targeted harassment and violence among individuals connected to the goth scene through interviews with a small but diverse sample of people. At all stages of recruitment, the researchers were explicit that we were as interested in those who had *not* suffered serious harassment as in those who had. As a consequence of this and the range of recruitment techniques used, we do not believe the sample to be especially biased towards those who had experienced unusually serious levels of abuse or violence.

All but three of the interviews took place face-to-face, either in the houses of participants, quiet public spaces such as coffee shops or university offices. The others were conducted via Skype. Interviews conversations were guided by a detailed topic-list devised in advance but were semi-structured and conducted in an informal manner, with participants encouraged to go beyond the specific topics raised in questions as much as they wished. This approach – and the decision to use qualitative interviews in the first place – were informed by our desire to focus on the detail of participants’ experiences and understandings of harassment, and of its significance to their identities, rather than to attempt to precisely quantify the phenomenon (Fielding and Thomas 2008). Both face-to-face and online interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analysed thematically. The latter process was characterised by a balance between examination of areas of interest established at the beginning of the project and themes and categories that emerged during the process of analysis (Hodkinson 2008). The research was approved by the University of Surrey\*\* Ethics Committee. To ensure participant confidentiality, all names in the account below are pseudonyms.

**Public harassment as integral to subcultural life**

Direct experiences of targeted abuse and harassment were varied among the sample. In the worst cases, individuals had been physically attacked in a manner that had left them with significant short-term injuries. In contrast, others explained that even minor forms of verbal abuse had been relatively unusual for them. For most participants, however, the receipt of public harassment[[1]](#endnote-1), in the form of verbal and/or minor forms of physical abuse was sufficiently regular that it had come to feel like a fairly normal part of their everyday experience. As in the case of Leblanc’s study of punks (2008), a notable proportion of the direct interactions that took place between goths and strangers they passed in public spaces seemed to have consisted of harassment of the former by the latter. Eleanor’s description of the kinds of attention she would fairly regularly receive was not unusual among the sample:

Eleanor (24): Most commonly it was just people yelling like ‘Goth’ or ‘Mosher’ or something at you... And I think most of the time it was just people yelling at me but I did get quite a few times where people spat on me…. Generally being in town really I think… there was just more chance of people deciding that they didn’t like the way you looked for some reason. And buses seemed to be quite a common one as well.

Others described different forms of verbal abuse from people on buses or trains, shouting out of passing cars or walking past. Comments would range from hostile references to subcultural membership, to general stigmatisation of difference (‘freak’, ‘weirdo’), mocking references to assumed interests, state of mind or behaviour (jokes about grave-yards, depression, self-harming) or threats of violence. Respondents also referred to overtly sexist or homophobic comments connected to the perceived feminine appearance of many goth men or, consistent with Leblanc’s (2008) findings on punk women, to the misinterpretation of some variants of female goth style as an indication of sexual availability. We explore the gendered aspects of such abuse a little more elsewhere (Garland and Hodkinson 2014a). Meanwhile, common examples of ‘low level’ physical harassment described by respondents included being spat at, having objects thrown in their direction or being pushed.

Though they were more unusual, serious incidents of violence included being punched, kicked or beaten up. Describing himself as an ‘ideal target’ for ‘people who lacked the self-confidence to pick a fight with someone their own size’, Jamie (33), for example, detailed to us a series of incidents in which he had been attacked as a result of his appearance, attributing the frequency of such incidents to the regularity with which he walked on his own at night and his unthreatening demeanour.

*Collective experience*

Crucially, in spite of being unusual, violent incidents tended to have a substantial impact on goths as a group, and often formed the basis of the expression of collective concern, worry and anger. Word of serious incidents would spread fast and social networking sites would enable collective revulsion to expand beyond any particular locality or peer group. This included occasional high profile incidents and, in this respect, the fatal attack on Sophie Lancaster was a striking example that had established itself in the collective consciousness of the scene and that individuals often connected to the more everyday incidents to which they or their peers were subject. As we have argued elsewhere (Garland and Hodkinson 2014a), such discourse resulted in a situation in which targeted violence affected the consciousness of goths even if they had never personally been attacked.

As a consequence of their own experiences and/or their consciousness of those of others, then, harassment had become something rarely too far from participants’ everyday experience. Verbal abuse could still be stressful and frightening but, rather than being shocked by it, participants often had come to expect such attention from time-to-time, regarding it as an unpleasant, but inevitable part of the subcultural lifestyle they had adopted. Some even indicated that they had learned to tune-out minor comments:

Rosie (29): To be honest, after a few years I just kind of stopped hearing it. You just hear a noise being yelled out of a car as someone drove past and kind of just completely ignored it.

For others, much as they expected such attention, even the slightest passing comment remained unsettling. And this connected to their awareness of more serious incidents that had occasionally been suffered either by themselves or others. The communal experience of such incidents alongside ongoing discourse about being vulnerable to harassment or attack had a two-fold effect. First, minor forms of abuse could be rendered more frightening because of the awareness of more serious incidents suffered by others (Garland and Hodkinson 2014a) and second, even for those who had rarely experienced harassment, the *possibility* of intimidation or attack often was at the back of their minds. As Sarah, who had never herself been the victim of violence, straightforwardly put it:

Sarah (20): I think to a certain extent you kind of expect it because it’s not unheard of for people to get beaten up because of the way they look.

Participants’ awareness and expectation of such a possibility was rendered particularly clear by interviewee accounts of their everyday awareness of possible sources of danger when they traversed particular spaces, and of the precautions and strategies they had developed to avoid it. Several felt that spotting and negotiating risky spaces, individuals or situations felt like second-nature, as here:

Laura (21): If I see a large group of young people on the side of the road, I do tend to cross the road. And it’s just a defence mechanism, I’m just used to them saying something to me. Even sometimes when I’m dressed like, if I’ve come from a job interview and I don’t look alternative at all, and they’d leave me alone. But it’s just from years gone by… like when we go out as a group, there’s normally like an air of… keeping an eye out for each other. Because we’ve all experienced what can happen if, you know, people turn…

Such collective internalisation of the possibilities of trouble and how to avoid it vividly illustrates how, as in the case of Leblanc’s study of punks (2008), the reality or possibility of being intimidated could form an everyday and ongoing part of the subcultural experience. A significant feature of the collective psyche of the group is made apparent, through its translation into forms of anticipation, anxiety and practical avoidance strategies. In a manner similar to Goodey’s (2005) discussion of groups whose routine activities place them in situations of possible danger, they had developed a particular sense of ‘victim-proneness’. A combination of direct experiences and discourse about harassment had led to an ongoing tacit awareness of the possibility of trouble and the semi-conscious deployment of strategies to avoid it as ever-present features of subcultural life.

Targeted harassment or violence, then, had indeed come to feel like an ever-present feature of being a subcultural participant. Michael put it in a way we found especially perceptive:

Michael (28): We’ve all gotten used to it… It’s almost part of the background noise of being a goth, is getting harassed by complete strangers.

At times, of course, such harassment could thrust itself firmly into the foreground, whether via particularly troubling personal experiences or feelings of shock and anger at violent incidents suffered by others. For the rest of the time, Michael’s notion of ‘background noise’, we suggest, nicely captures the banal constancy of people’s experiences and understandings of harassment and the possibilities of it. Accumulated past experience, ongoing discourse and the broader feelings of being a potential target were collectively internalised by participants in such a way that they formed an important part of what we might think of as their subcultural habitus (see Mitchell 2007).

**Harassment and broader societal hostility**

Earlier in this article we suggested, following Leblanc (2008) that, although studies of the harassment of subcultural participants are unusual, theories about the broader social reaction subcultures can elicit and the role of such reactions with respect to the identities of participants, may prove useful in understanding such harassment. Sure enough, rather than being seen as a discrete phenomenon, targeted harassment tended to be understood by our respondents as part of a broader tendency to be marginalised, stigmatised and, sometimes, discriminated against by various aspects of wider society. Even though we asked no specific questions about broader stigmatisation, most respondents keenly raised it themselves. A range of examples were provided, including being stereotyped by mass media, wrongly accused of misdemeanours, moved on or not taken seriously by police, refused entry to nightclubs, disowned by family or friends and discriminated against at work. In many participants’ understanding, such experiences were inseparable from harassment at the hands of passers-by. In the following example Eleanor refers to situations concerning excessive security guard attention and those relating to hostility from members of the public:

Eleanor: Going into any shops, if they had a security guard, you knew the security guard was going to follow you round the whole store very subtly. So yes, I got used to that one. Generally being in town really I think, where there’s more people, there was just more chance of people deciding that they didn’t like the way you looked for some reason.

Sometimes, the connections between these different sorts of hostility were particularly explicit. More than one participant noted, for example, that, in their response to incidents of harassment or violence against goths, police, parents or others had a tendency to focus on the subcultural appearance of the victim as a causal factor and the adoption of a more normal appearance as the suggested solution. While keenly aware of the role of their cultural trajectories and choices in placing themselves in a potentially vulnerable position, participants were hostile to such perspectives, regarding them as a form of victim-blaming and as evidence that hostility on the street connected to a much broader lack of acceptance of their lifestyle. Harriet, for example, lamented the way negative media representations of goths had contributed to an attitude that prompted her parents to respond to the murder of Sophie Lancaster by encouraging their daughter to tone down her appearance:

Harriet (20): I just have this feeling that so many like goths and metal-heads and alternative people are just generally misrepresented so badly. And I sometimes, particularly with my parents, they just seem to have this very old fashioned view, that if something happens to you because you look different or unusual, then that’s your problem… I remember being really stunned and horrified by the way my mum reacted when I told her about Sophie Lancaster… She just said, ‘Well that’s why you have to be careful about what you wear’, and I just found that really upsetting.

Others regarded abuse and violence itself as something that had resulted directly from more general misrepresentation and hostility. Claire attributed pressure to adopt a more normal appearance from her family and the abuse she sometimes received from strangers to misunderstandings of the scene derived from media stereotypes:

Claire (32): I’ve written so many complaints to the TV… I can remember writing to Coronation Street [UK soap opera], I think, when one of their characters was a goth… they’d gone for the negative stereotype, as the moody, I’m staying in my bedroom and I’m interested in murder… And that wouldn’t help I don’t think, that really doesn’t help.

From the point of view of many respondents, then, the everyday experience of negotiating the possibility of abuse in public spaces formed a particularly direct and unpleasant component of a broader marginalisation of their subculture by various facets of a narrow-minded society outside it. This sense of being stigmatised was something developed and understood on a collective rather than just an individual level. It had come to comprise an important part of internal subcultural discourse, both through grassroots conversation between individuals and, sometimes, more organised, larger-scale types of internal communication. Experiences of being harassed, for instance, form part of a discourse of being maligned, misunderstood and pressured to be ‘normal’ in the lyrics of some goth and alternative music. For example, lyrics to the album track, ‘Leave Me Alone’ by Florida goth/darkwave band Crüxshadows include the following: ‘everywhere I go they all stare, I don’t understand why they care, they stare at me in all black, and when I turn they stare at my back’ (The Crüxshadows 2006).

**Affirming identity and embracing otherness**

It was clear from the accounts of respondents that, through forming such an important part of collective discourses about societal hostility, experiences of targeted harassment were contributing to the strength of participants’ overall attachment to the goth scene. As such, harassment can be partly understood, we suggest, with reference to elements of the social reaction theories discussed earlier in the article. Leaving aside the controversy surrounding Albert Cohen’s functionalist explanation for the *emergence* of subcultures (Blackman 2014), we found respondent accounts of the significance to their subcultural affiliation of the feelings engendered by experiences of harassment – and the ways these connected to broader feelings of societal marginalisation – to be strikingly reminiscent of elements of the post-subcultural-formation transactional processes described by Cohen (1955), Becker (1964), Young (1971), Stan Cohen (1972), John Clarke (1976), Fine and Kleinman (1979) and, more recently, Thornton (1995), Williams (2011), Brown (2011), Haenfler (2012) and others. In some cases respondents were emphatic that being harassed because of their subcultural appearance had both strengthened their subcultural identity and emboldened them to display their allegiance, as here:

Lauren (53): No, in a way it made us defiant. We will walk the streets of [town], we will wear velvet and you won’t damn well stop us. I think in a way it reinforced our pride in ourselves. We will walk the streets of [town], we will look stylish and glamorous and stuff you know. Ridicule isn’t a thing to be scared of, as long as it is ridiculed.

There are some nuances to take account of, here, though. In spite of the boldness of Lauren’s statement, it would be far from accurate to infer that, as a whole, goths revelled in the ways they were targeted for harassment. Neither did such harassment represent a ‘fulfilment’ of any oppositional agenda of their own, as was the case, according to Sarah Thornton (1995), with the relationship between 1990s club culture and media moral panics. We have already noted that many goths had become used to taking precautions in public spaces to avoid attracting negative attention. And some reported that, at certain moments, they had been moved to reflect upon the danger that they could be putting themselves in by dressing in a subcultural manner. Such findings suggest that direct harassment, through the physical danger in which it can place people, may be distinct from broader forms of societal rejection such as negative media coverage or adverse comments from politicians, in the sense that it can lead to strong feelings of anxiety and fear with respect to personal safety.

Nevertheless, moments of genuine doubt tended to pass, while precautions in public places, far from reflecting mixed feelings about subcultural identity, usually amounted rather to pragmatic coping strategies or, stigma management, as Haenfler (2012) would have it, designed to render a subcultural lifestyle more feasible in a hostile environment. And the flip-side of the anxiety that harassment could lead to, was that it also rendered such experiences a particularly powerful focus for shared identity. As we have shown, the ongoing experience of feeling targeted constituted crucial common ground between participants. And, as Barbara Perry (2014\*\*) demonstrates in relation to established hate crime victim groups, a shared feeling of being under threat of attack can engender a particularly strong sense of cohesion and mutual reliance. Goths may not have been entirely protected, as Albert Cohen (1955) would have it, from ‘mixed feelings’ about their way of life, but the tendency for their identities ultimately to be strengthened in the face of the negative attention to which they were subject coheres with the thrust of social reaction subcultural theories of the past and present.

As well as contributing to shared identity through common experience, the resentment that resulted from feeling under attack also contributed to a discourse of *defiance* – illustrated clearly in Lauren’s extract above – and, in turn, to the consequent reinforcement of perceived boundaries of values and identity between the subculture and outsiders. Beth put this succinctly:

Beth (25): …it [experiences of harassment] also reinforces this like sense of the other. It’s good because it intensifies your community spirit, but it also solidifies your feeling against the other group.

And, as inferred by Beth, a key part of this process was the construction among subcultural participants of particularly negative understandings of a ‘normal’ or ‘mainstream’ external culture that tended to be associated with *both* the specific phenomenon of targeted harassment *and* a broader perceived stigmatisation of their subculture. Copes and Williams (2007) identified a similarly vehement rejection of a generalised mainstream culture in relation to references to low level harassment among straight-edge participants. And, although context and details are different, it is hard not to see connections with Albert Cohen’s broader observation that ‘the typical solution [to societal hostility] is to devalue those whose good will and respect are forfeit anyway’ and that in the face of societal hostility subcultures develop internal discourses characterised by ‘contemptuous images of those groups whose enmity they have earned…’ (1955). Alternatively, as Stanley Cohen puts it, ‘if one is seen as the enemy… it is not difficult to respond in similar spirit: one “rejects the rejectors” and “condemns the condemners”’ (1972: 179).

*Constructing/rejecting ‘normal’*

While traditional social reaction theories sometimes have had a tendency to take subcultural projections of a singular ‘dominant society’ at face value, more recent theorists, such as Thornton (1995) and Hannerz (2015\*\*) have shown - in relation to club culture and punk respectively - how the constructions of mainstream culture against which subcultural participants affirm their identities can be context-specific and contradictory. Thus, sometimes the mainstream is decried for homogeneity or lack of originality, other times for being too commercial; sometimes it may refer to respectable society, other times to fashionable or trendy youth or even popularised versions of their own style (also see Copes and Williams 2007).

Discourse about the mainstream culture they oppose is similarly complex among goths (Hodkinson 2002), even in the particular context of conversations about targeted harassment. Participant references to ‘normal’ often indicated a broad dominant society that was conformist, lacking in creative freedom and intolerant of difference. In other cases, more specific groups or institutions were understood to represent normal culture, from mass media, to the culture of their parents, to understandings of mainstream youth culture. In the case of the latter, the finger of blame for harassment of goths sometimes was often pointed towards ‘chavs’, understood as loud, aggressive groups of youth with a propensity for violence and trademark forms of style, such as sports gear or jeans and a shirt. Chavs and goths often have been presented as particularly opposed youth groupings (see McCulloch et al 2006), while some have assigned Sophie Lancaster’s killers to the former category, but recent analysis indicates that chav functions primarily as a dominant cultural label used to vilify particular groups of working class youth (Tyler 2008; Jones 2012).

Yet, in spite of the presence of some of these class connotations in their use of the term, goths’ rejections of chav culture reflected this dominant usage only partially. This is because, even where chavs were singled-out, they tended to be regarded (rightly or wrongly), not as opposed to, but representative of dominant or normal culture. Michael was specific in identifying chavs as a distinct group responsible for hostility towards goths at some points in his interview but, later, positioned them as representative of a broader notion of ‘normal’ which, as a consequence, he felt an ever-stronger motivation to reject:

Michael (28): Chavs are an annoying but accepted part of mainstream culture. We aren’t.  And as a result, fear, suspicion, mistrust, misplaced aggression and violence, that’s what we get…  [imitating] ‘Well why don’t you stop being that way, why don’t you be normal?’ And the response is always, look at the way normal people treat me, my friends. Why in god’s name would I ever want to be normal?

When asked to elaborate, many recognised that judgements about ‘normal’ could be inconsistent or questionable, and that, in practice, their relationship with broader society was more complex than such categories allow for. Nonetheless, the association of harassment with the values of a negatively characterised mainstream – however inconsistently or selectively it was conceived – was integral to a reaffirmation of subcultural identity invested in difference.

*Collective Self-Othering*

Internalisation, then, of the notion of being targets for harassment and of the association between this and a broader sense of being maligned by society, contributed to the strengthening of existing subcultural attachments and, specifically, to a positive emphasis on being different, other or abnormal that has often been identified as a feature of the subculture (Hodkinson 2002; McCulloch et al 2006; Haenfler 2012). A notable illustration of this is provided by the propensity for goths to exchange in-jokes whereby they would mockingly shout simulated abuse at one another (‘freak!’, ‘weirdo!’ or just ‘goth!’) as if from the mouths of aggressive passers-by. Such jokes were universally understood within the subculture and required no explanation, as here:

Jamie (33): And, of course, it’s become parodied a lot these days, when you go to a festival, you all cruise round, stick the person with the most ludicrous cyber dressed heads out the window and get them to yell ‘Goth!’ at other passing goths.

In other cases, terms of abuse, such as ‘freak’ and ‘weirdo’ were appropriated, reclaimed and positively embraced in a more serious manner, reminiscent – in some respects at least – of the reclaiming of once-discriminatory terms such as ‘queer’ or ‘poof’ in some LGBT parlance (Bristow and Wilson 1994).

Importantly, like the discursive emphasis within the subculture on being the target for societal disapproval discussed in the previous section, the strengthening of this positive embrace of otherness among goths reflected both everyday grassroots communication and more organised subcultural media channels. Consistent with McRobbie and Thornton’s (1995) development of moral panic theories, the process of responding to societal rejection and re-affirming an identity invested in difference and otherness involved more than a simple interaction between facets of external society and isolated subcultural individuals. Rather, it entailed the articulation of subcultural discourse and identity at a collective and, sometimes, organised level, through the circulation of lyrics, slogans, images and commentaries, and these feeding from and into more grassroots conversations, feelings and actions (also see Brown 2011).

Two particularly obvious examples of the role of organised communication in the subcultural embrace of otherness were song lyrics and slogans on mass-produced and purchased T-Shirts. Inspired by the high profile murder of Sophie Lancaster, goth-oriented metal band Delain’s ‘We are the Others’, for example, offers a rousing affirmation of subcultural otherness in the face of the threat of being targeted as a result of being different: ‘We are the others, we are the cast-outs, we're the outsiders, but you can't hide us’ (Delain 2012). Interestingly, the SOPHIE (Stamp Out Prejudice, Hate and Intolerance Everywhere) campaign, set up in memory of Lancaster seemed also to be contributing, in some respects, to this conscious, positive embrace of otherness. Respondents, many of whom had participated in an outpouring of shock, anxiety, anger, solidarity and defiance in the aftermath of the murder, were all aware of the campaign and most were highly supportive of its attempts to increase understanding of and legal protections for alternative subculture participants. Many, for example, wore SOPHIE campaign wristbands, subscribed to associated mailing lists and Facebook groups or, sometimes, wore campaign T-shirts emblazoned with ‘WEIRDO, MOSHER, FREAK’ and in so doing positively associated themselves with some of the most frequent terms of abuse levelled at members of the subculture in public places.

Through organised and more spontaneous grassroots forms of communication feeding into one another, subcultural identities were apparently being strengthened in response to experiences and talk of targeted harassment. And the specific strengthening of a collective embrace of otherness, whether through internal jokes, T-shirts, song lyrics, internalised self-understandings or ongoing references to difference from a perceived narrow-minded normal society, formed part of this. As well as being collectively experienced, then, harassment, via its connection in subcultural discourse to broader feelings of marginalisation, engendered communal responses and was, in this respect, ingrained as part of collective and individual self-understandings.

**Conclusion**

It is worth reminding readers that, in spite of routine experience of verbal harassment across our sample, serious violent attacks were relatively unusual and some had experienced even verbal abuse only occasionally. Nevertheless, it is our contention here that experiences, discourses or understandings of targeted harassment formed a somewhat ever-present and internalised feature of subcultural life. As we have outlined elsewhere, this could sometimes lead to considerable anxiety (Garland and Hodkinson 2014b) and, partly as a result of this, it had also come to form a component of shared subcultural experience that tended to strengthen participants’ investment in subcultural identity and their embrace of otherness.

Experiences and discourse about harassment combined, we argue, to generate ongoing awareness and anticipation of possible abuse and the routine deployment of avoidance strategies as a normal part of everyday routes through public space. Whether an individual had been the subject of serious attack or not, the spectre of harassment formed an ongoing accompaniment to subcultural participation. And direct and indirect experience of harassment tended to form part of a broader sense of being marginalised and stigmatised by what participants tended to characterise as ‘normal’ society. As such, even if individual experiences of harassment were attributed to specific hostile groupings, they had a tendency to feed into the strengthening of a collective identity invested in distinctiveness from mainstream society.

In developing these arguments, we have shown, following Lauraine Leblanc and others, how some features of classic and more recent interactive and social reaction theories may still have purchase in making sense of subcultural experiences of harassment. Notably, the tendency to understand harassment as a manifestation of broader external hostility, the role of this in the development of shared negative understandings of external society and the strengthening of investment in collective difference recall some features of social reaction theories. Yet, recognition of the complexity and inconsistency of subcultural constructions of normal society (Hannerz 2015) and the role of organised subcultural communication in responses to hostility (McRobbie and Thornton 1995), can help provide a more nuanced understanding of such processes. Meanwhile, social reaction theories have tended to exclude public harassment from their analyses and it is a greater understanding in this respect that constitutes our primary contribution here.

The anxiety and emotion surrounding direct and indirect experiences of abuse or attack, we suggest, provide substantial common ground among subcultural participants and can prompt the development of particularly powerful forms of shared identity invested in difference. We also move beyond questions of stigmatisation, however, in highlighting the practical and symbolic importance of being an ongoing potential target for hostility. Often in the background but sometimes thrust dramatically to the fore, it can form, we argue, an internalised, ever-present and collectively-felt accompaniment to subcultural life.

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1. Following Leblanc (2008), we utilise Carol Brooks Gardner’s broad understanding of public harassment as ‘that group of abuses, harryings and annoyances characteristic of public places and uniquely facilitated by communication in public’ (1995: 4). Specifically, we include a range of types of incident, including being verbally abused, followed, pushed or targeted with vomit or small objects. This covers the majority of the experiences respondents recounted, though a minority had been subject to more serious physical attack. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)