

Self-Identified “Goths” Are Elevated in Mental Illness, Unconventional Sexuality, and Homosexuality

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Abstract

The Goth is an increasingly prominent social stereotype, with qualitative investigations into Goths revealing Goth identity to be associated with mental illness and escape from reality, as well as with sexual promiscuity, at least among females, and androgyny among males. In this study we aim to quantitatively test whether these stereotypes are true. In order to do this we drew upon the large OKCupid dataset (N = 68,371). We find that being a Goth is most associated with mental instability, replicating a previous study. There are weaker associations between being a Goth and homosexuality and sexual unconventionality. We argue that the relationship between being a Goth and mental instability makes sense in terms of mimic aposematism and aspects of Narcissism.

Keywords: Goths, Mental illness, Depression, Anxiety, Promiscuity, Homosexuality, Anal sex, Risky sexual behaviour

1 Introduction

Goths are a subculture that began in the UK in the 1980s, developed by fans of Gothic Rock. This was an offshoot of so-called Post-Punk bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Cure (Van Elferen & Weinstock, 2015). It developed into an aesthetic and artistic movement that was inspired by multiple influences, including Gothic literature, Gothic horror films (in particular Hammer Horror), cults, and mythology (Bibby & Goodlad, 2007). Gothic literature is generally defined as a form of fiction centered-around remote settings in which there are mysterious and violent incidents and, often, a melancholy air. This kind of fiction began to emerge at the beginning of the nineteenth century with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* being a key example. The movement is also influenced by various forms of art that might be seen to have Gothic themes, such as the German Expressionism of the 1920s. Goth fashion is characterized by dark clothing, black lipstick, dyed black hair, and black leather boots (see (Hodkinson, 2012)).

Research has found that identifying as a Goth is associated with depression and self-harm (Bowes et al., 2015). It has also been found that traits that are indirectly associated with the Goth subculture, such as having tattoos and dying one's hair unnatural colours, are associated with mental instability (Dutton & Kirkegaard, 2022). The specific subculture of the “Goth” has provoked a great deal of interest in the participant observation literature due to hyper-femininity among females and androgyny among males (Issett, 2011, p.137) and the way in which it has been commercialised (Brill, 2007); (Goulding & Saren, 2009). It has also provoked interest due to the evidence that females, specifically, adopt this identity as a form of escape from reality (e.g. (Peirson-Smith, 2012)). There is also an overlap in stereotypes between female dominatrices and Goths (Hodkinson, 2012) as well as a stereotype that Goths are sexually promiscuous (Hodkinson & Garland, 2016). Male Goths, according to the research, enjoy transgressing gender and sexual boundaries (Issett, 2011).

The study which presented evidence of mental instability (Bowes et al., 2015) was heavily critiqued for its sampling choices, especially because only 43% of the eligible cohort was included in the final analysis

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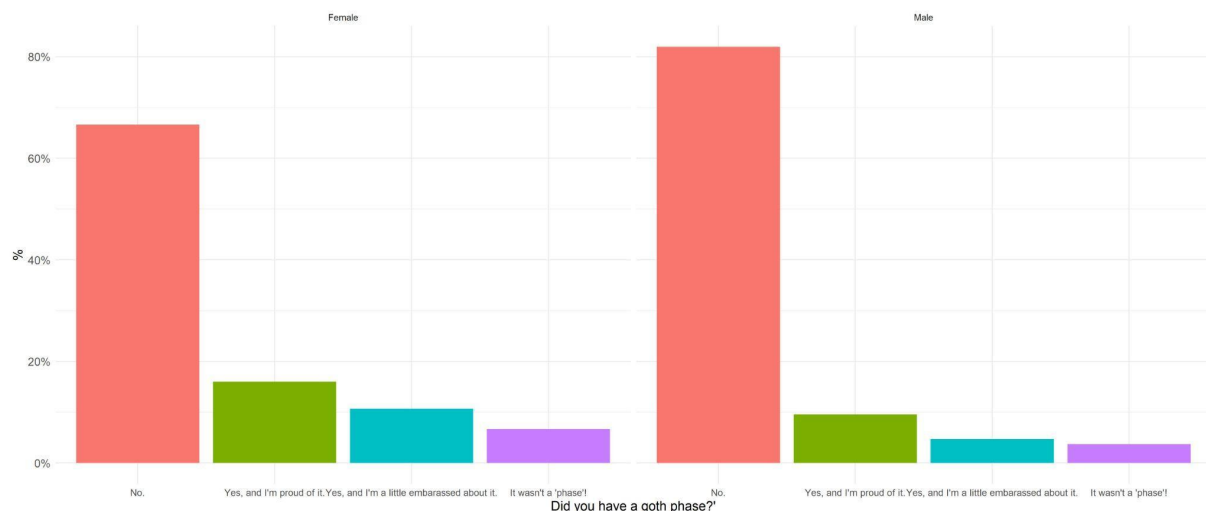


Figure 1: Goth question patterns among respondents split between sexes.

(O'Connor & Portzky, 2015). In this study, we aim to extend this research into Goth subculture by drawing upon a very large dataset which permits us to examine the relationship between Goth subculture and a substantial number of stereotypes about Goths. Are these stereotypes accurate? Which of them, if any, are accurate? This will also permit us to test anew the relationship between Goth subculture and mental instability.

2 Method

We employed data from the OKCupid sample (Kirkegaard & Bjerrekær, 2016). This is a dataset of more than 60,000 profiles scraped (automatically downloaded) from the dating site OkCupid.com in 2016. The dataset consists mostly of people from Western (95%), and Anglophone (85%) countries. The mean age was 31.7, and the sample contained 60.6% males and 39.1% females. Prior studies using the dataset have found that well-established associations can be replicated in the dataset, and thus it seems suitable for analysis and is adequately representative (DiPiero, 2018; Figueroa, 2018; Hauser, 2018; Kirkegaard, 2018; Kirkegaard & Bjerrekær, 2016; Kirkegaard & Lasker, 2020). We can find no evidence that Goths are considerably less likely to use dating sites than are the general population.

There are more than 2,500 variables available for study. We searched the question bank for variables that seemed to fit the general stereotypes with regard to Goths, permitting us to test their veracity. Also there were many questions that indicated the same trait, so these were useful for factor analysis. In total, 83 items were selected, which were then combined into 18 different factors, as shown in Table 1. The numerical coding of these variables is available in a supplementary file.

22,347 people answered the question “Did you ever have a ‘Goth’ phase?” (Fig. 1). 69.2% of these respondents were males. Most respondents answered ‘No’ to the question. The Goth question is more precisely about having a Goth phase, even though for some people it wasn’t just a phase. Goth identification is less frequent among males than among females -- 33% of females had a Goth phase, while only 18% of males did. When treated as a numerical variable, people who responded ‘No’ were coded as 0, “Yes, and I’m a little embarrassed about it” was coded as 1, “Yes, and I’m proud of it” was coded as 2, and “It wasn’t a phase!” was coded as 3.

Table 1: Aggregation of items into factors

Factor	Items
Drug usage	marijuana, drug_use, psychedelics_use
Sleep issues	sleep_time, sleep_trouble, sleeping_during_the_day, insomniac
Alcohol usage	life_without_alcohol, alcohol_use, alcohol_inhibit_sexual_tensions, blackout_from_alcohol
Nationalism	burning_own_flag_illegality, worth_more_than_strangers, into_foreign_accents, wearing_shirt_with_flag, partner_same_ethnicity_as_you
Hygiene	brushing_teeth, showering, mess_cleaning, bathroom_cleanliness, messiness
Anger	angry_video_games, general_angry, quietly_angry, throwing_objects
Physical health	six_pack_importance, physical_shape, physical_strength, good_posture
Gambling	gambling, gambling2
Rebelliousness	problem_with_authority, ever_arrested, trouble_as_child, fights_with_authority
Sexual unconventionality	receiving_anal_sex, porn_collection, dating_sex_worker, dating_HIV_positive, dating_trans_person, dating_herpes_positive, foot_fetish
Confidence	self_confidence, comfortable_with_yourself, self_esteem, sexual_confidence
Religion	believe_in_god, religion_important, religious_duty_important, homosexuality_is_sin, belief_in_miracles
Sexual liberalism	too_many_sex_partners, multiple_sex_partners_same_time, consider_fwb, fourteen_sexpart_alot
Polygamy	open_to_poly, open_to_dating_poly, pref_poly
Money saving	money_saving, impulse_purchasing
Vegetarianism	am_vegetarian, consider_vegetarianism
Natalism	desired_fertility, planned_child_names, looking_to_have_kids
Not grouped	anime, dancetopless, numincome, tattoos, a_lot_of_black_clothes, are_freckles_attractive, cosplay, education_level, scared_of_commitment

3 Results

Zero-order correlations between identifying as a (former) Goth and each item were computed and posted in Fig. 2. As expected, Gothic identification correlated with wearing lots of black clothes ($r = .44$, $p < .001$) and experiencing depression ($r = .29$, $p < .001$). Goth identity was coded from 0 to 3, depending on the category.

Fig. 3 shows the correlation matrix of all factor scores as well as Gothic identity. Every single factor had a statistically significant correlation with Gothic identity, except for the tendency to gamble ($r = -.044$, $p = .051$). The largest correlations were with mental illness ($r = .19$, $p < .001$) and sexual unconventionality ($r = .21$, $p < .001$).

To test whether this is an artifact of demographic confounding, the relationship between Gothic identity and mental illness, sexual unconventionality, and homosexuality was tested before and after controlling for age, sex, race, and income using multiple linear regression. Goth identity, age, the dependent variables, and income were all standardized to ease interpretation of the tables. All three associations remained after these controls, as shown in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

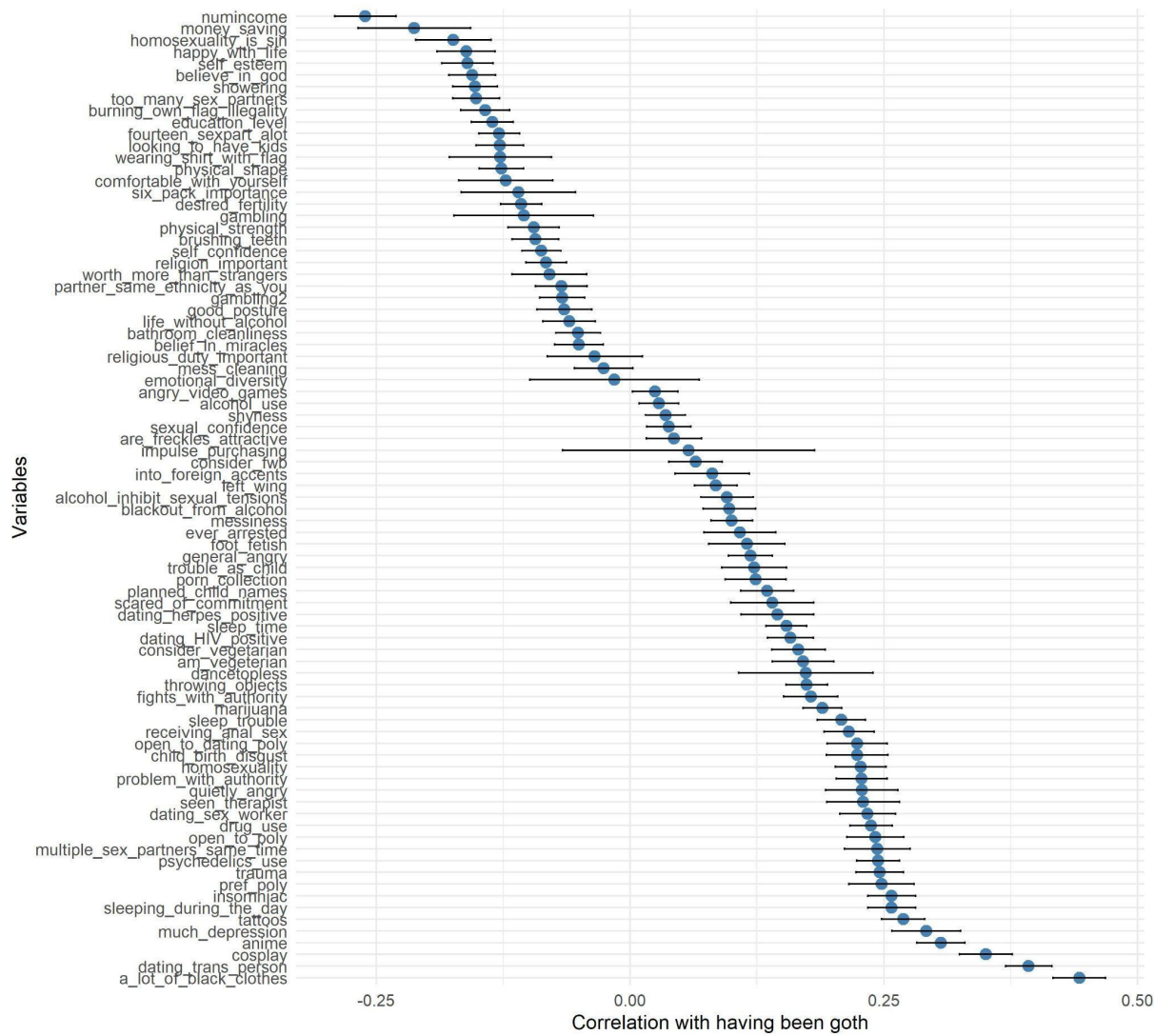


Figure 2: Polychoric correlations between self-reported Goth identity and items. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

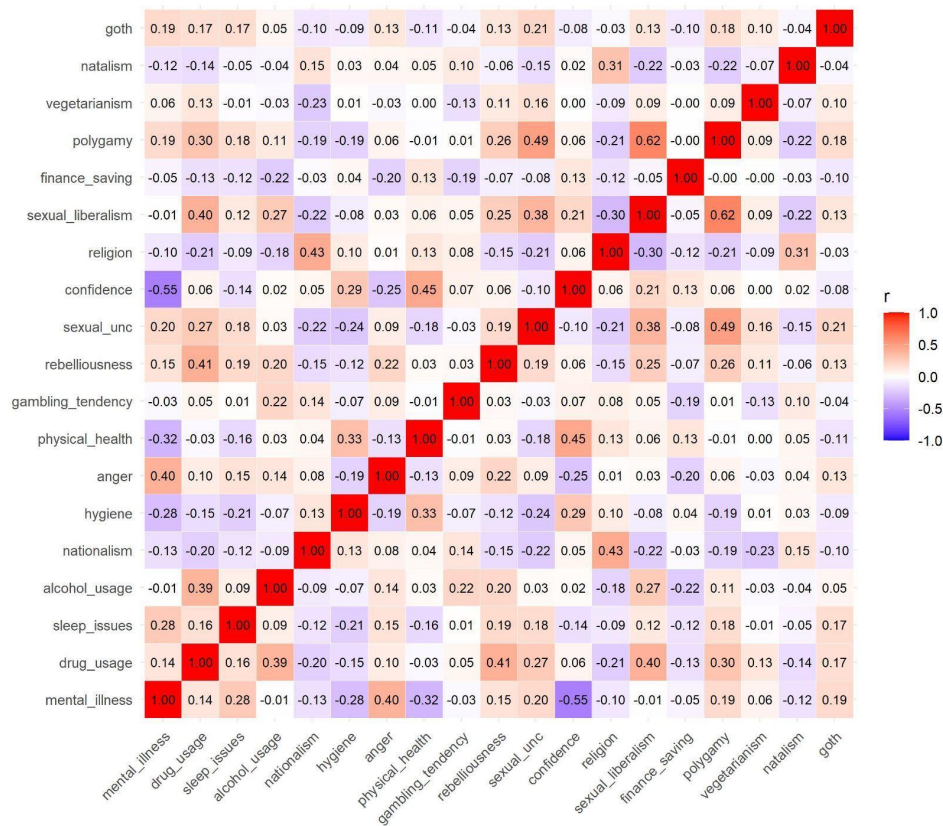


Figure 3: Correlation matrix of computed factor scores

Table 2: Regressions predicting mental illness as a function of Goth identity and demographics. Standardized betas with standard error in parentheses.

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2
Goth identity	0.20 (0.031)***	0.19 (0.054)***
Age		-0.025 (0.050)
Sex (male)		-0.11 (0.13)
Asian		0.30 (0.34)
Black		-0.52 (0.30)
Hispanic		-0.60 (0.28)*
Amerindian		2.16 (0.95)*
Other race		0.50 (0.37)
Selected over 1 race		0.061 (0.15)
Income		-0.08 (0.05)
Sample size	1118	349

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

Table 3: Regression predicting sexual unconventionality as a function of Goth identity and demographics

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2
Goth identity	0.22 (0.016)***	0.19 (0.027)***
Age		0.027 (0.028)
Sex (male)		-0.048 (0.071)
Asian		-0.54 (0.29)
Black		0.031 (0.15)
Hispanic		-0.20 (0.15)
Amerindian		-0.17 (0.58)
Other race		0.075 (0.20)
Selected over 1 race		0.059 (0.081)
Income		-0.081 (0.027)**
Sample size	3992	1372

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

Table 4: Regression predicting homosexuality as a function of Goth identity and demographics

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2
Goth identity	0.10 (0.0074)***	0.075 (0.012)***
Age		-0.099 (0.013)***
Sex (male)		-0.24 (0.030)***
Asian		0.13 (0.10)
Black		0.25 (0.068)***
Hispanic		0.10 (0.067)
Amerindian		-0.12 (0.20)
Other race		0.29 (0.085)***
Selected over 1 race		0.091 (0.040)*
Income		-0.052 (0.015)***
Sample size	21681	6436

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed)

4 Discussion

As expected, the strongest psychological relationship with Goth identification is ‘mental illness’, at $r = 0.21$. This is consistent with the research by Dutton and Kirkegaard (2022), which found a robust relationship between mental illness and dyeing one’s hair in unnatural colours. A reasonable interpretation is that people who are high in anxiety adopt a very strong sense of identity, to alleviate feelings of meaninglessness by convincing themselves that they have a clear place in the world. In addition, as with poisonous insects that display bright colours, adopting such an identity may be the “strategy” of an anxious person conveying to potential aggressors that they are somehow dangerous and, therefore, the potential aggressor needs to ‘stay away’. This is known as aposematism in nature. To the extent that Goths are not genuinely dangerous, this aposematism is in fact mimicking, much as the harmless hoverfly repels predators by looking like a wasp. Congruous with elevated mental illness, Goths display elevated insomnia, drug use (possibly as a means of relieving negative emotion), rebelliousness (which implies unhappiness with the world) and having tattoos, conspicuous markings which could be interpreted in a similar way to unnatural hair colour and which do, in fact, correlate with depression in the OK Cupid dataset (Dutton & Kirkegaard, 2022).

A second, related, interpretation is that one means of dealing with negative feelings such as anxiety, depression and low self-worth is via a kind of ‘narcissism’ in which you tell yourself that you are somehow superior to others (see (Aslinger et al., 2022)). It may be that Goths, with their embrace of death and morbidity, engage in this practice. They are able, via adopting this identity, to persuade themselves that they are deeper than and less conformist than other people and are therefore, somehow, of greater worth. It has been argued that the Goth model Autumn Meadows may exemplify this (Davis et al., 2008). Other researchers have suggested that some form of narcissism may be germane to making sense of adopting Goth identity (e.g. (Redwood, 2013), p.81). A broader study of those with deviant appearance markers, including Goths, found that they are elevated in sub-clinical psychopathic traits, low self-esteem, and openness (Nathanson et al., 2006), a finding which is also consistent with the above suggestion that Goth identity is a means of negotiating low self-esteem. The relationship between Goth identity and having tattoos and being vegetarian could be interpreted in a similar way, as these are also associated with mental instability (Dutton & Kirkegaard, 2022). They can be seen as ways of negotiating this by asserting a clear sense of self, intimidating aggressors, making oneself feel morally superior, or all three. It has been found that even organic food consumption is associated with narcissism (Zacher, 2024).

It is very interesting that Goths are slightly elevated in terms of anal sex desire, sexual unconventionality, and experimentation with homosexuality. This would be congruous with the stereotype noted above that Goth females are signalling sexual availability. Many studies have found that there is a very strong environmental component to female sexuality and that it is more fluid than male sexuality. When females are unable to find a male partner, they may experiment in homosexual relationships in a way that males are much less likely to do in similar circumstances. It has been suggested that this is because females are adapted to being part of polygamous mating systems in which the less favoured mothers alloparent each other’s children, with sexual dimensions helping to bond and stabilise such a relationship (Jeffery et al., 2019). They are more likely to experiment in this way if they are faster life history strategists. This is a suite of traits that is adaptive in an unstable ecology and which includes poor impulse control and high mental instability (Luoto et al., 2019). Such people invest energy primarily in sex whereas slow life history strategists invest it primarily in nurture. This interpretation would make sense of the evidence that Goths in general are more likely than others to engage in relationships with multiple people at the same time, engage in risky sexual activity such as anal sex and sex with those who have HIV, are more likely to not want children and are more likely to be disgusted by the idea of childbirth. Being fast life history strategists, they are calibrated towards sex and towards the necessity to take risks in an unstable ecology, not towards nurture and stability.

In addition, it has been found that a traumatic childhood, which can lead to or enhance a fast life history strategy, elevates the likelihood of a female being receptive to anal sex (Scheidell et al., 2020), presumably as she wishes to please her partner (Reynolds et al., 2015). This may be a reflection of low self-esteem. In addition, Goths and similar groups have been found to be high in openness (Nathanson et

al., 2005), and sexual curiosity has been found to be a factor in females receiving anal sex (Benson et al., 2019) and even — mediated by the trait openness — in engaging in homosexual activity (Allen & Robson, 2020).

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