

Caught in the web: Male Goths using online ICTs to transcend rural reality

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Abstract

This empirical qualitative study explores male Goths' lived experiences in rural Australia. Offline, participants felt rural communities' 'conservatism' and hegemonic masculinity norms restricted their Goth identity expression and subcultural participation. Further, their commonly perceived homosexuality, irrespective of self-identified sexuality, was believed responsible for much assault, ostracism, and 'othering' experienced in rural, but not urban, environments. To escape rural realities and engage in 'authentic' identity expression, participants vociferously interacted in online communities which, more than augmenting offline reality, created opportunities systemically impossible due to rurality and permitted subcultural participation and self-identity expression they believed reduced isolation and positively affected their mental health.

Keywords: identity, gender and sexuality norms, online interaction, rurality, communication, subculture, discrimination

Introduction

The capacity of rural communities to offer physically and emotionally safe environments for expression of alternative socio-cultural identity contrasts markedly with urban places (Ragusa & Ward, 2015). While dichotomisation of urban/rural locations may fail to capture the nuances illuminated by problematized understandings of how location affects the social construction of culture and self-identity, literature reviews document pronounced global urban-centric biases in academic examination of Goth subculture (Ragusa & Ward, 2015). In light of existing biases, this article takes up the challenge to explore if and how rurality may differentially affect non-dominant cultural/subculture expression/identity, and potentially produce very 'real' outcomes of hate crime and discrimination (Ensor, 2013; Garland, 2010; Garland & Hodkinson,

2014), without reifying location by constructing false geographies of difference. Critically considered, it commences in light of prior research evidencing rural communities are typified by cultural homogeneity, tend to hold more conservative worldviews, and respond to socio-cultural plurality more negatively than urban environments which exhibit greater tolerance for diversity and are unencumbered by attachment to a 'rural idyll' (Agyeman & Neal, 2009; Chakraborti & Garland, 2006; Neal, 2009).

Rurality in contemporary Western societies is socially organised in ways deeply informed and affected by digitalisation. Online communities offer a bridge when gaps exist between preferred social identity and place. Expansion of information communication technologies (ICTs), from social periphery to being integral to everyday interactions (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 2012; Dehning & Richardson, 2002), both reconfigure the social organisation of advanced capitalism and enable alternative individuals, such as rural Goths, to engage in social interactions while minimising harmful exposure to hate crime and discrimination that may characterise their physical environments. Moreover, ICTs facilitate participation in online social interactions that those with atypical self-identities, what sociologists historically termed 'deviant' identities (Scott, 1971), may struggle to find in seemingly conservative or psychologically/physically dangerous social environments.

Identity is a complex and varied phenomenon. Research has long demonstrated individuals respond to the symbols, images, and communication cues that advertisements or marketing campaigns project when they connote affiliation and/or sympathy with their self-identity (Dehning & Richardson, 2002; Oakenfull, 2007). Further, interaction effects caused by affiliation with multiple social identities, for example gender and sexuality, cause members of marginalised subcultures to behave differently (Oakenfull, 2007). Despite contemporary individuals being affiliated with many/varied identities and subcultures, sociological research has historically homogenised individuals to illuminate trends and differentiate demographic groups (Hebdige, 1979). This is conceptually and practically problematic. Creating distinct subcultures that correspond to identifiable products enables consumers to easily adopt and demonstrate subculture affiliation by purchasing a social identity; a simple act, such as buying energy-efficient light-bulbs, may be marketed as conferring entry into a subculture, in this example 'environmentalist'. Postulating consumption as sufficient

criteria for adoption of a new self-identity, i.e., ‘green consumer’, fails to recognise the importance ‘social’, beyond ‘market’, interactions play as vital components of (sub)culture.

The value of the current article lies in its demonstration of how self-identification with a marginalised and stigmatised subculture, ‘Goth’, is deeply affected by realities created by social environments (physical and online). This empirical study explores how self-identification with Goth subculture, notorious for its countercultural beliefs, alternative gender performances, and individualistic expression, is best understood not as a homogenous, reified social category, but rather as a dynamic and fluid enactment of ‘self’ that is deeply affected by the presence, or absence, of perceived tolerance. Although the fluidity of identifiers may differentially affect Goths being socially labelled as counter-normative (for example, heterosexual versus non-heterosexual), this article prioritises examination of Goths as a single subculture for the research aim of examining how this social group perceives their online interactions affect subculture participation and Goth identity, while presenting individualistic differences to contextualise and inform future research.

Literature review and theory

Demographic variables, such as geographic location, age, gender, sexuality, and educational level, have the capacity to affect social identity and expression in powerful ways. Research and theory from disciplines as varied as criminology, psychology, media studies, gender studies, and sociology have long argued experience of ‘social reality’ is contingent upon a diverse mix of socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors (Featherstone, 1991; Luxmoore, 2011; Neal, 2009). Often associated with social constructivism, and underscored by Foucault’s (1978) research and theory, critical investigations assert consumer product association with gender/sexuality not only establishes a foundation for self-expression, but also economic manipulation and exploitation (Budgeon, 2003; Featherstone, 1991). Likewise, rurality affects life experiences, particularly for marginalised social groups, and exerts pressure for compliance with hegemonic identity norms (Alston & Kent, 2008; Linderman, Flouris, & Crane, 2016; Ragusa & Crowther, 2014; Waite & Bourke, 2015). Thus, social constructivism permits critical conceptualisation of how social

reality is individually perceived while simultaneously considering how social structure, particularly rural geography, influences opportunities.

Social constructions of the modern Australian male reveal the extent to which social identity may be gendered, conflicted, and/or confined by traditional hegemonic masculinity, particularly in rural communities characterised by conservative social norms and dichotomised gender labels (Connell, 1995). Connell (1995) uses the concept 'hegemonic masculinities' to refer to the dominant type of masculinity present in a particular culture, place, and/or moment in time. In rural Australia, the masculine ideal encompasses anti-feminine, emotionally reserved, and homophobic sentiments, competitiveness, hardiness, and aggression (Wade, 1998). Isolated rural men are increasingly compelled to embody this masculine ideal and meet traditional hegemonic masculine standards or face discrimination, hate, and/or violence (Brandth & Haugen, 2005). As such, men identifying with alternative masculinity ideals may seek communities that transcend the limitations hegemonic masculinity imposes. In our digitalised age, online communities offer one outlet for transcending the limitations that face-to-face interactions in physical communities, rural or otherwise, may impose.

Information communication technologies pervade the contemporary organisation of communities and social interactions, which are unprecedentedly interconnected and homogenised. Nevertheless, social researchers critically question their capacity to ameliorate the shortcomings of rural communities. For instance, many assert virtual interactions merely augment local social relationships, rather than bridge geographical boundaries, assuage social isolation, or create extensive external virtual networks (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013; Ragusa, 2010; Rye, 2013; Stillman et al., 2010; Valentine & Holloway, 2001; Waite & Bourke, 2015). In contrast, others, such as Mac an Ghail (1999), argue ICTs can act as 'technologies of the self' by providing access to alternate lifestyles/subcultures and offering virtual gateways to communicate and practice 'ways of being' (p. 436). Indeed, the Goth subculture emerged during the eighties post-punk movement, coinciding with ICTs reaching expeditious levels of growth and transforming communication norms (Brill, 2008; Hodkinson, 2002).

The present study of the role of ICTs in developing and/or sustaining male Goth identity and subculture participation in geographically-isolated Australian locations informs a growing discourse about online interactions. Since the millennium, society has radically embraced ICTs (Keengwe & Malapile, 2014; Khetarpal, 2014).

Information communication technologies encompass ‘any communication device or application’ (Yu & Li-Hua, 2010, p. 1), yet increasingly imply the internet, a global connective system and vehicle for synchronous and asynchronous communication (podcasts, blogs, wikis, email, videos, live streaming websites, forums, instant chat, and social media sites). Thus, it is unsurprising that, although ICTs encompass multiple technical innovations, much ICT and subculture research focuses on the internet and interactive tools (Blevins & Holt, 2009; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Johnson & Sihvonen, 2009; Whittaker, 2007). Some further argue contemporary society must depend on ICTs to keep up with ‘knowledge age’ demands (Yusuf, 2005), describing ICTs as, ‘essential tools in addressing national and global challenges in education, health, demographic change, security and environmental management’ (Lasen, 2010, p. 1118).

Web-based ICTs, embedded in global capitalism, constitute a contemporary landscape promising opportunities for traversing organisational forms, real time, and space (Andronie & Andronie, 2014; Stafford & Hillyer, 2012). The systemic changes ICTs engender encourage individuals and organisations to ‘create, enhance and re-discover social ties through interactive and transparent forms of communicating and collaborating’ (Pak & Zhou, 2013, p. 96), all crucial for examining subcultural usage. Despite critiques that digital consumption exacerbates social isolation, ICTs can provide a less discriminating, flexible environment to shape relationships in a globalised world (Akpan, 2003). Although online friendships represent a “crucial framework for the social engagements of tomorrow” (Robards, 2010, p. 11), nevertheless, like face-to-face interactions, ICTs may also perpetuate social inequality by emphasising inclusion/exclusion (Haddon, 2000).

Social exclusion conceptually differs from geographical isolation. Rural Australia has a long history of isolation (Agyeman & Neal, 2009) and a continuous record of socially excluding individuals who fail to conform to normative cultural expectations, such as hegemonic masculinity (Brill, 2008; Connell, 1995). Today, some assert interactivity constraints imposed by geographic boundaries are surpassed because virtual communities globally connect individuals (Keengwe & Malapile, 2014). In this new information age, collective culture faces globalising forces that homogenise the individual (Ragusa, 2010). Yet, as culture becomes homogenised, individuals risk obsolescence, constantly having to update skills, knowledge, and create/maintain connections in multiple digital platforms (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2013; Robinson,

Cotton, & Schulz, 2015). Conceptually, the connection between individuals and ‘the system’ is not only mediated, it is constantly re-created through digital identities.

Information communication technologies are a primary tool for individuals in geographically-isolated places to learn cultural norms, experience social inclusivity, escape violence, escape real-life hate and discrimination, and find social acceptance. This makes digital networks vital to contemporary relationships, identity formation and subculture definition/maintenance (Stafford & Hillyer, 2012). “The Internet is not simply a static cultural object but is used for the formation of new forms of individual and collective identity” (Korgen, 2008, p. 33). The internet empowers individuals to find and assess, for their own purposes, alternative fashion, body modification, music, group behaviours, activities, and ‘scene’ expectations or ideals (Elias & Lemish, 2009; Harris, 2000; Hodkinson, 2003; Williams, 2006), as well as perform physical and virtual resistance (Blevins & Holt, 2009). Both online and offline personas contribute to ‘the self’ as a ‘product of social interaction’ (Davis, 2012, p. 635). Further, some argue social identity grounded in the ‘real world’ can be replicated more authentically online where individuals may feel less inhibited to share their ‘true’ selves, play with multiple identities, self-presentation, or sub-cultural hybridity (Ebare, 2004; Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Wilson, 2006).

In contrast with foundational subculture definitions (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979), contemporary sociologists replace ‘deviant identity’ with the concept of ‘other’ (Huo, 2007; Luxmoore, 2011; Staszak, 2008), ‘a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued . . . [‘them’] and another that is defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination . . . [‘the other’]’ (Staszak, 2008, p. 1). Experiencing heightened social exclusion (Huo, 2007), ‘others’ with counter-normative identities often seek out supportive environments and/or rebel against social traditions. Cohorts ‘otherised’ by dominant culture join subcultures to seek ‘solidarity, revolt, and individuality’ (Clarke, 2007, p. 223) or practice social dissent through ‘shock and dismay’ by disobeying ‘prescribed confines of class, gender, and ethnicity’ (Clarke, 2007, p. 223). Thus, subcultures may offer association or comfort for informal deviant behaviour (Huo, 2007).

Recent literature on Goth culture has followed the development of targeted subcultural victimization as a newly defined form of ‘hate crime’ (Garland & Hodkinson, 2014). Targeted attacks on Goths and other subcultural minority groups have been prominently and persistently featured in news articles worldwide. In the UK it was not until 2013, six years after the heavily publicised death of Goth teenager Sophie Lancaster, that Greater Manchester Police categorised such violent acts against subcultural members as a punishable offence. Studies examining implications for Goth victims conclude further empirical evidence is required before a deeper understanding of Goth victimisation following these legal changes can be established (Garland & Hodkinson, 2014; Hodkinson, 2015). We contribute to such bodies of research by exploring how Goths manage discrimination and violence in their rural communities and how online ICTs shape identity negotiation in cyberspace and create new positive Goth-to-Goth outsider relations.

Subcultures, as centres of negotiation, vary greatly in cyberspace. The extreme metal scene has shifted towards decentralisation, with members opting for online interaction over communicating in person (Harris, 2000) in contrast with the straightedge and Rave subcultures that use ICTs to share music, build friendships, and provide ‘brotherhood’ support for their straight/clean lifestyle (Wilson & Atkinson, 2005). From country music fans to Muslim punks, Geeks, gay Emo boys and veiled Muslim women’s subcultures, online realities are often described as more accepting of difference, offering a medium for self-expression, identity, and social status development (Lee & Peterson, 2004; McArthur, 2009; Murthy, 2010; Nisa, 2013; Peters, 2010). Some subcultures, such as net radio, function exclusively online (Baker, 2012). The role of ICT in subculture participation, embodiment, and even existence is crucial. In rural Australia, ICTs have permitted Goth scene participation and support in the absence of the physical amenities offered in metropolitan spaces. Although the internet became ‘a significant part of the Goth Scene’s infrastructure’ (Hodkinson, 2003, p. 286) the sparse academic research examining Goths’ online interactions, in the late nineties, describes the internet as a place for subculture exploration and exhibition (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008), ‘where battles between different message producers and knowledge claims play out’ (Wilson, 2006. p. 324). Deriving from the post-punk musical genre ‘gothic rock’, Goth exalts darkness, the macabre, and alternative ideologies and practices (Brill, 2008) and generally attracts those feeling ‘othered’ or socially disconnected (Spooner, 2006).

Goth online interactions test social boundaries, permit culture sharing, and contribute to subcultural coherence by initiating new members and helping maintain and cement real life identity, for example by supporting gender expression (Hodkinson, 2004; Johnson & Sihvonen, 2009; Whittaker, 2007).

Finally, Brill (2008) asserts although Goth has an ‘ideology of genderlessness’ (p. 38), the subculture is largely feminine in nature. While Goth culture supports male counter-normative gender attributes, hyper-femininity remains the expectation for women, while female masculinity, or what Halberstam (1998) describes as a ‘lively and dramatic staging of hybrid and minority genders’ (p. 332), is considered largely unattractive. With such open views on gender and sexuality, Goth is often construed as bisexual, as well as being homosexual and trans-friendly (Spooner, 2006). The present study not only contributes to discourse on the role of ICT in Goth self-identification//expression, importantly, it examines if/how online interactions contribute to participants’ perceived exclusion/inclusion in rural communities, survival in ‘mainstream’ culture, and experiences as ‘other’, as ‘different’ from traditional, hegemonic Australian culture.

Research methods

Conducted by a cross-cultural research team of American and Australian-born sociologists, with participatory experience in urban (New York) and rural (New South Wales) Goth scenes, the present study used social constructivist methodology to investigate how male Goths living in rural Australia believed offline and online interactions affected their Goth identity/subculture participation. The research design was informed by social theory (Connell, 1995; Foucault, 1978; Hall, 2012) and examination of how self-identity, expression, and social interactions are shaped by normative, hegemonic cultural expectations with ‘real world’ implications (Cohen, 1985; Tait, 1999). Priority was given to using a research method with capacity to obtain first-hand accounts from members of the Goth subculture in a non-invasive and non-threatening fashion. To generate data able to illuminate meanings individuals construct about their ‘lived-experiences’ (Seidman, 1998), technology-mediated qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen for their traditionally-identified capacity to access hard-to-reach, geographically-disbursed populations.

Although sociological research methods historically advocate using face-to-face or telephone-mediated interactions to conduct interviews, contemporary research methods have identified the value of conducting online interviews to gain in-depth sociological data, particularly about topics socially perceived to be stigmatising (Ragusa & Groves, 2010). Similar to telephone interviews, the online interview environment may liberate both researcher and participant from normative constraints implicit in face-to-face settings (Ragusa & Groves, 2010; Wynn & Katz 1997).

Interviews were conducted online using Facebook chat offered a simple, cost-effective, and efficient interview setting as a password-protected, private synchronous environment able to generate in-depth, qualitative data that online surveys, either qualitative or quantitative, may struggle to obtain without the social interaction involved in synchronous communication. Moreover, online chat maximised the potential to yield high-quality, fluid responses because, in contrast with face-to-face and telephone interviews, participants were given the opportunity to think and edit their interview responses prior to ‘final’ submission. To establish researcher-trust and credibility, all participants were sent a detailed description and purpose of the research project prior to participation. All participants engaged in a brief, informal chat with the researcher prior to the interview commencement, building trust and rapport between researcher and participants.

For participant recruitment two key Goth social media sites, Australian Gothic Society Facebook Group (AGSFG) and Vampirefreaks, were selected. Recruitment entailed placing a call for academic research participation on these sites. In 2013 the first 25 self-identified Goths who responded to the call and met the selection criteria were invited to a voluntary, non-renumerated 45-minute online interview. All participants were provided with the university’s paperwork for human research ethics compliance and approval and informed consent was obtained prior to interview commencement. An interview schedule was followed to ensure continuity of questions across participants.

Data analysis proceeded with multiple readings of transcripts, ‘memo-ing’, and the creation and review of deductive and inductive coding frameworks by the research team to identify response patterns across participants (Davies, 2007). Limited demographic data was collected to describe participants’ backgrounds and no conflict of interest, research funding, or negative outcomes ensued.

Findings from two key questions, ‘What role does technology play in your life as a Goth?’ and ‘How do you think your location and Goth identity affect your display of gender?’ are presented to examine if, and how, male Goths felt location and/or technology affected their self-expression and behaviours in rural Australia. Identification codes were used to differentiate interview quotes and ensure participant anonymity. Goths are frequent social media users (Hodkinson, 2002; Scharf, 2011) and this study may be indicative of broader social trends, but, consistent with qualitative ontology and epistemology, findings are not intended to be generalizable beyond the research sample (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Findings

The 25 interviewees participated from their rural residential locations: New South Wales (n=11), Queensland (n=7), South Australia (n=3), Western Australia (n=3), and the Northern Territory (n=1). Demographics collected and reported elsewhere in greater detail (Ragusa & Ward, 2015) reveal all were biologically male, most (88%) Australian-born, and approximately half (56%) completed a university or post-graduate degree. Participants were divided between young adults between 17 and 30 (40%) and those between 31 and 48 years of age (60%).

Participants self-identified numerous ways and reasons they used internet-based ICTs for Goth subculture participation in rural Australia. Rurality was perceived to restrict Goth identity performance physically and socio-psychologically. The heat (G17) from Australia’s hot climate was raised repeatedly when discussing how location affected their display as Goth. ‘The hot weather itself affects my choice in clothing’ (G18). Traditional, conservative community attitudes and actions in response to Goth appearance were commonly noted. ‘Where I live... is a very small and narrow-minded community and it can be very isolating for a Goth to live in that sort of environment’ (G15).

As a 30-year-old bisexual born in Sydney described, ‘I can understand why some rural Goths have trouble because rural areas are commonly known as ‘fixed’ places with conservative populations’ (G13). The term ‘conservative’ is used here, as well as in previous literature, to define places or communities strongly upholding traditional hegemonic ideals (Neal, 2009). Similarly, a 29-year-old asexual Queenslanders noted

that rural areas are overly conservative and always making offensive comments. Likewise, a 29-year-old bisexual born in rural Australia also felt rural communities are closed-minded which in turn makes it difficult to fully express yourself, making you steer clear of social areas or going out in public (G7). These participants openly and proudly defined their sexuality while rejecting normative homophobic sentiments.

Detailed accounts of how rural Australia affected Goth self-expression and display, and the affect social responses had on their sense of self, accompanied descriptions of rural conservatism. For a 17-year-old heterosexual Goth from Queensland, location deeply affected not only his Goth display, but also his well-being.

Other people in my town try to hurt me for being different. They yell at me, poke fun at me and call me a faggot. So yeah, I guess it really does change the way I am and how I feel (G17).

This Goth frequently ‘escaped’ through technology. I’m online all the time. I play online RPG with my other Goth friends. It’s nice to chill and relax away from all the shit in my town (G17).

All participants described experiencing pressure to conform to hegemonic gender norms, while expressing strong beliefs about individualistic expression and diverse sexuality. As one nurse explained, we should be individuals and look and behave how we want to, not how we are expected to (G22).

Yet, many may choose to act like the stereotype, either due to them choosing to because of it being how they wanna be, or for acceptance in the community. This will always be the case, in Goth and other cultures (G22).

Much rural community resistance related to Goths’ self-expression through appearance, as the demand by employers for conservative attire demonstrated:

I have had to change my expression of self significantly to obtain work experience in the areas of work I wish to pursue. Earrings out, hair changed, not wearing any of the clothes I feel comfortable in. That was quite a tough experience for me, but I hit a dead end, and saw that I couldn't achieve what I wanted being myself (G13).

All participants struggled in their rural communities, with experiences ranging from discomfort to violent crime, often because of perceived homosexuality, due to subcultural and/or alternate gender displays. Public interactions produced experiences

from, ‘I get called a poof a lot, and I struggle to be myself and express myself where I live now’ (G13) to, ‘Where I come from, people treat you as a serial killer and a freak’ (G6). The struggle to ‘be Goth’, which was construed as being ‘oneself’, countered retaining employment except for those employed in art communities. Speaking of his employment as a very toxic environment (G10), a 45-year-old heterosexual Goth said, ‘The mistake of being myself...has cost me my job, “being oneself”’ (G10). To others, displaying Goth openly results in violence in rural places (G6).

Physical appearance deeply affected Goths’ display and public response. Participants carefully adapted self-expression to suit their physical environment and social interactions:

There are times when I dress very normal just to manage the heat and the people in my town...the people aren’t great ... Some are accepting but most try to make you back down from your different expression. They try to intimidate you. They get in your face and make you uncomfortable (G19).

A stay-at-home-dad described, ‘moving to where I’m located now with the heat and the shallow people, I’ve had to change my appearance a lot’ (G12) and a former tradesperson said, ‘I’ve frequently been threatened and scrutinised for my appearance, which caused me to...not dress quite so Goth’ (G11).

Dressing Goth in rural Australia not only limited self-expression, it caused feelings of self-betrayal, guilt, fear, and bullying. For example, one participant explored how community members, or ‘bogans’, an Australian colloquialism for rough, lower-class citizens, made him feel uncomfortable.

I only really dress up as my true Goth self at home as I’m mostly too frightened to go out and be mocked for who I am by the bogans (G15).

‘I do dress down to avoid bullying, which makes me ashamed. Because I’m not being true to myself. I hate how people can scare me that much’ (G17).

Although participants reported feeling socially-pressured to modify their Goth display, a minority felt rural locations were becoming more accepting of Goths:

I used to want to look more manly due to social pressures. I used to get harassed when I went shopping. Kids would come up to me and ask ‘are you a

boy or a girl?’ That doesn’t happen so much anymore. Either people have got over it or attitudes in these parts are finally changing (G14).

Interestingly, this heterosexual 32-year-old also noted,

On my own farm I can dress and act how I wish, that is the luxury of having no neighbours. But in the nearest city, I generally don't display Goth anymore because I've experienced harassment (G14).

Thus, it is questionable if social attitudes and responses to Goths, irrespective of urban/rural locations, are changing.

A common coping strategy to negative social interactions/community responses was behaviour modification, specifically to not ‘display’ Goth or present as a counter-normative gender and/or sexuality in public, particularly when the sentiment, ‘I don’t see country towns changing anytime soon’ (G7) was expressed. Negative rural community response was often attributed to the subculture’s femininity, which contrasted with traditional male gender stereotypes. Most in the subculture are feminine (G19); ‘I believe Goth is very feminine as a subculture’ (G15). Goth femininity often contrasted with socially normative stereotypes of ‘feminine’ and of course, rural hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). For instance, as the 42-year-old Melbourne-born Goth elaborated, ‘I lean towards masculine, even when wearing a skirt and make up I feel I still look masculine’ (G19). Goth display yielded feeling ‘different’ and ‘weird’ in many rural environments. ‘Even when I worked in a factory with lots of men I was always myself and some thought me to be a bit weird’ (G19). Similarly, a married, heterosexual agricultural student who self-identified as masculine reported hang[ing] around a lot of rural males made him instantly considered ‘some sought [sort] of weirdo or queer’ (G21) which made him feel like an outsider who can’t make friends ‘... can’t express myself properly’ (G21) living in a very cruel community. Hence, he frequently altered his Goth display to minimise his children’s suffering and avoid other university students’ ridicule.

In contrast with physical communities, online communities offer alternative social environments where Goths experience much-desired social acceptance. For the Melburnian living in rural NSW, ‘technology has put me in touch with others in the subculture. I find likeminded people to share my time with. I would also be lost without online shops’ (G19). Likewise, a 25-year-old living in rural Queensland said,

People who don't 'fit in' can search the net for others elsewhere who don't 'fit in'. I only have one friend who is in my town, the other 10 are online. I'm always logged on (G16).

The internet was a crucial component of Goth subculture for all interviewed. A 47-year-old Australian pursuing a master's degree in business summarised, 'ICTs are a feature of most subcultures, but more so [in] Goth than others' (G24). Likewise, another described,

For most in the subculture, the web is where we find our path and our companions. I have a lot of Goth friends online who I talk to on a regular basis (G22).

Information communication technologies offered emotional support, comfort and a feeling of inclusion when 'real world' environments felt alienating, exclusionary, and expect[ed] normal clothing, no make-up, no self-expression (G23) from men;

90% of a Goth's life is spent online. Especially in the case of a rural Goth's life, the web allows us to talk to each other without being insulted or judged by outsiders (G3).

Born in the UK, a 30 year old homosexual Goth summarised,

My location restricts how I can display Goth and gender. People can be discouraging to say the least and the heat really does stand in the way of the ideal self-image (G25).

This participant also resisted hegemonic masculinity, describing his alternate gender display as a crucial part of his Goth identity, one that did not 'fit' within in his rural community.

Information communication technologies create access to new sub-cultural contacts, specifically Goths in other geographical locations accessible only through social media, as three examples demonstrated. A 21-year-old Australian described, It's made a big difference in the way I interact with others. I'm a real loner. Most of my friends are in the virtual community, not the rural community (G23). Likewise, the 30-year-old UK born participant was,

forever on the internet talking to my friends. My true friends, Goth friends, are always there for me when I need them. They are only a click away. It was so

comforting finding other weird souls through social media. I stopped feeling so lonely (G25).

A third noted, ‘Technology has put me in touch with others in the subculture. I find likeminded people to share my time with’ (G19).

Goths rarely distinguished between ‘real’ and ‘online’ friends since most friendships were made possible through ICTs.

My friends are online. It’s ridiculous how hard it is to find friends in a rural place. Living in a rural environment can be a trying and lonesome experience. I learnt about Goth dress and make up online. I found a place to belong there (G6).

Rural Goths found online friends created through ICTs helped them cope with isolation, receive affirmation, build self-identity, and assuage depression produced in physical locations ‘where it’s either rude comments...or I get publicly shunned’ (G2). A pansexual 33-year old relocated Sydneysider couldn’t imagine going a day without being online (G2), a bisexual 24-year-old relocated American was, online every day ‘because I feel isolated and disconnected from Goth’ (G1) and a gay 20-year-old from rural NSW believed ICTs were part of Goth identity. ‘I’m always on my smartphone checking my Facebook and my email for updates ... I didn’t have internet access for a few years ... they were tough years’ (G15). Comments such as, ‘It’s critical to my identity ... I signed into Facebook every day to chat to my other Goth friends’ (G10) and, ‘It has influenced my concepts of Goth and my gender identity’ (G14) abounded, with some elaborating virtual interactions were vital to their well-being. A 21-year-old Queenslander who received a great amount of [negative] retaliation from his local community, and attributed this to the near-absence of Goths in his isolated, small rural community expressed:

Because of the limitations my location imposes on me ... I would say it [technology] is important to my identity as a Goth boy in rural Australia. I have friends online in Goth forums. It’s really critical I talk to other Goths or I find myself getting depressed easily (G18).

Information communication technologies not only permitted safe interactions, they also permitted interactions with others in the subculture in the first place. ‘Chatting ... is very helpful for isolated Goths’ (G13). A 37-year-old heterosexual father-soon-to-be-a-grandfather found ICTs an escape from a cruel reality. ‘I chat to my friends online

every day. If I didn't have them there to talk to I don't know how I'd manage – I'd be lost' (G9). Living in rural South Australia, ICTs offered him a reprieve from a mainstream culture, including employers, who he said are still very conservative (G9). Participants recounted community members labelling them 'gay' or 'fag' (G9) and explained how ambiguous gender in rural society often led to homophobic sentiments. A 48-year-old from South Australian noted how:

the internet has really helped me come out of my shell and plays a great role in putting alternative youth in contact with each other. It's nice to know we're not alone, especially when living in a rural community, you can feel very much that way (G8).

although physical environment still matters greatly to Goth self-expression. 'People where I live also affect how Goth I am ... I was severely bullied' (G12), overall, technology was perceived as central to Goth subculture globally (G12).

As a subculture, Goth has changed a lot with the internet taking a significant role in how we dress and see ourselves. The ability to share images and ideas has made Goth very much an online subculture now (G12).

Information communication technologies did not simply permit information exchange; they created essential human interactions not possible offline where rural Goths are isolated and widely disbursed. 'Without the internet, I would feel isolated, different and abnormal. Having the support of my online friends gives me the courage to be myself' (G4), explained a 17-year-old relocated to rural Queensland from Sydney. In a rural community where 'wearing a kilt automatically makes me a homosexual to them, but that's just ignorance on their part' (G7), ICTs engender positive social interactions and coping strategies. 'I guess the lack of local facilities isn't so bad because of technological options ... I met my now wife on a Goth dating website, that's pretty cool' (G7). Only one participant, a heterosexual 44-year-old in rural South Australia noted,

we can also be attacked, mocked and discriminated ... cyber-bullied, concluding, but it's mostly productive. The onset of technology in rural Australia has greatly altered people's perception of Goths ... that's a very important point (G5).

Discussion and conclusions

This qualitative, empirical study explores how male Goth living in rural Australia felt ICTs affected their experience of Goth subculture. Four key insights were garnered. First, the rural community expectation of male compliance with hegemonic masculinity greatly affected participants' experiences. Adopting the femininity associated with Goth subculture, rather than conforming with the rigid hegemonic gender norms expected by their rural communities, often caused participants to be perceived as homosexual—irrespective of their self-identified sexuality—which led to verbal and physical assault, ostracism, and 'othering'. Despite most participants' heterosexuality, many discussed the importance of acceptance and individual determination of self-expression, whether Goth, sexuality, gender or otherwise, and believed urban Australia (including urban employers) held less parochial views about diversity than rural Australia.

Second, all participants felt compelled to modify their Goth display, including gender expression, in public due to negative social pressure and, along with the minority/absence of Goths in rural Australia, all sought solace in online communities. All reported some, or entirely, positive experiences with ICTs for accessing broader Goth subculture, with online subculture interactions creating feelings of acceptance, reducing isolation, and positively affecting mental health, including mitigating depression.

Third, although opinion was divided about whether rural Australia would/had changed its negative perceptions of Goths, agreement emerged regarding the centrality of ICT to Goth subculture. Information communication technologies enabled scene awareness, participation, and friendship opportunities not possible offline in rural communities, corresponding with the fourth, and arguably most important, finding. Online interactions did not augment local, 'real world' friendships, as recent research found (Waite & Bourke, 2015). Rather, ICTs provided opportunities for social interactions systemically otherwise impossible or improbable in rural communities as others reported (Rye, 2013; Valentine & Holloway, 2001). Participants described online friendships as their only 'real' friendships due to their Goth self-identity and perceived difference/'outsider' status in their rural communities. While most remained virtual

friendships, some transcended the digital divide, such as the online friend who became a participant's wife.

Research questioning the capacity of ICTs to create social interactions that transcend the limitations of rural geography and calling for an examination of how ICTs affect life experiences (Awan & Gauntlett, 2012; Stillman et al., 2010) have led recent investigations in rural Australia to respond critically to the plurality of 'deficit model' approaches used to explore rurality (Waite & Bourke, 2015). Deficit models conceptualise rurality as a factor disadvantaging specific social groups, with some arguing ICTs heighten opportunities for rural individuals (Rye, 2013; Valentine & Holloway, 2001). Others conceive ICTs as a, 'tool to facilitate geographically embedded relationships rather than to open windows of opportunity exposing users to global social networks' (Waite & Bourke, 2015, p. 215).

By conceiving individuals as empowered by technology to construct self-identity, the present study found rural Goths overwhelmingly felt restricted, constrained, and imposed upon by their conservative rural communities. Information communication technologies empowered rural Goths to vent their fear, frustration, and anger with the negative behaviour experienced offline as a result of their Goth display and self-expression. Thus ICTs offered opportunities otherwise unavailable, making this work consistent with deficit-inspired research. On the other hand, ICTs assuaged the lack of authenticity Goths felt from conforming to employer and community-created gender conventions, albeit online interactions did not have the power to eliminate negative offline social realities.

Prior research has played down the impact virtual interactions have on everyday human relationships, arguing they complement, but fail to replace, face-to-face friendships or bridge the 'geographical gap' of rurally isolated individuals because 'online friends' are also local community members (Waite & Bourke, 2015). Our study offers an alternative perspective and seeks to encourage discourse about the role of ICTs and their value to mitigating the mental illness, social isolation, and ostracism experienced by 'others', such as rural Goths, who do not conform with traditional, conservative norms and values in rural communities. Whether teens, young parents, middle-aged employees struggling to retain jobs, or 'elders' modelling diversity and acceptance for children/grandchildren, acting authentically as 'oneself', as a Goth, led participants to be 'othered'. Information communication technologies created social

cultures and self-identities otherwise impossible, enabling rural Goths to feel empowered to survive as ‘others’ in non-virtual rural communities where they faced discrimination (Garland & Hodkinson, 2014).

Although online communities offered greater safety, support, and freedom than the physical rural Australian communities where participants lived, , future research may wish to investigate if/how computer-mediated interactions may be used to constructively facilitate interactions to increase exposure to diversity and further offline acceptance of alternative subculture, gender, and sexuality expression in physical communities characterised by cultural homogeneity.

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