

# Exploring the intersection of subcultures and gender diversity: Using Gothic style as an example

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**Abstract.** In the internet era, there has been an increasing number of subculture enthusiasts expressing themselves through subcultural fashion. This phenomenon has brought gender diversity into focus, leading people to reevaluate their own gender identity beyond traditional binary concepts. Against this background, this study takes Gothic style clothing as an example, exploring the relationship between subcultural fashion and gender diversity from the historical development of Gothic style to various styles of Gothic fashion today. Through semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis, the study examines issues related to gender expression, cultural influence, gender symbolism, and the transmission of gender information. The discussion focuses on how cybergoth style clothing helps individuals express their gender and also reflects their personal style. Subcultural fashion plays a role in helping non-binary individuals express their psychological gender and resist mainstream stereotypes. The goal is for everyone to develop a correct understanding of their own gender identity and break free from traditional binary limitations. Additionally, it is hoped that society will provide a more inclusive and understanding environment for non-binary individuals.

## 1 Introduction

With the development of the Internet, various subcultural styles have become popular among youngsters. Through subcultural fashion, an increasing number of individuals are breaking traditional gender stereotypes to express themselves, which is known as gender diversity. Among enthusiasts of subcultures, those who dress in gothic-style clothing are particularly prominent. This article takes the gothic style as an example to explore the relationship between subculture and gender diversity, as well as the role played by the Internet in this phenomenon.

The development of the Internet has led to the emergence of gender diversity. In contrast to the traditional binary division of male and female genders, more voices regarding different self-perceptions of gender have come into the public eye. People are beginning to reconsider their rigid physiological sex and whether it aligns with their own understanding of their gender. In "Cultural Interpretation of the 'Tomboy' Phenomenon in Network Fashion and Gender Subculture", Yaoji Tan points out that, unlike the traditional image of weakness for women, the "tomboy" image has begun to spread on the internet, demonstrating a sense of power for women and a specific subcultural resistance to mainstream culture [1]. Gradually emerging on the internet is a trend of cross-gender or neutral dressing through gothic-style clothing. Scholar Zeyuan Tuo believes that this gender reshaping does not directly challenge the boundaries of gender, but rather subtly weakens stereotypical impressions [2]. Accordingly, this study analyzes the role of subcultural fashion in expressing non-

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binary gender identities among cybergoth enthusiasts through interviews with subculture aficionados. It also explores how participants, under the influence of the internet, have come into contact with subcultures and developed a more diverse understanding of their own gender.

What role does the gothic style in subcultures play in expressing gender diversity? Subculture is elaborated in Hebdige's theory as "resistance, style, and incorporation", and Jiangfeng Hu explains it as "a subcultural way of challenging dominant culture and hegemonic culture through stylized, alternative symbols, with resistance, stylization, and marginality" [3, 4]. In terms of gender expression, subcultures have challenged traditional binary gender definitions through their clothing choices. The gothic style, as one of the stylized forms of dress, presents a gender image that differs from the traditional binary concept. It tends to express a more neutral and fluid gender identity, regardless of whether it is associated with traditional masculinity or femininity.

After reviewing a large number of literature on subcultures and gender diversity expression, there has little in-depth exploration by scholars on the role of subcultural clothing in expressing gender diversity. In this rapidly developing epoch of the Internet, how does subcultural style help people to express their gender? What messages do wearers of subcultural clothing want to convey? Is the gender information expressed by the same clothing different in different cultural backgrounds? Based on these questions, this study conducted research on the relationship between subcultural styles, using gothic style as an example, and gender diversity expression.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Historical Development of Gothic Style**

The term "Gothic" originally referred to the Goths, a nomadic tribe of the Germanic people in Scandinavia. During the medieval period of the Roman Empire, the Gothic tribes from Germany began to invade Italy and eventually contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. In the 15th century, Italians initiated the Renaissance movement to revive ancient Roman culture, leading to the widespread construction of churches as symbols of identity and status. The most famous example of Gothic architecture is Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris [5]. As for the inspiration for Gothic fashion, it can be traced back to the later Victorian era when mourning attire played a significant role. Different designs of mourning attire continued to influence Gothic fashion - including black colour, ruffles, soft caps, and pleats. Other elements from the Victorian era also had an influential impact on Gothic fashion such as pale skin, tight corsets, dark shoelaces, and "button-up" boots. In the early 19th century, popular vampire films emphasized the mysterious aspect of the Gothic style.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of the Gothic subculture as one of the most prominent contemporary expressions of Goth. The inspiration for Gothic rock comes from Gothic literature, with themes including sadness, nihilism, dark romanticism, tragedy, and morbidity. It emerged in the late 1970s in the UK as a fusion of post-punk. These bands created a unique dramatic visual style, such as wild hairstyles, smoky makeup, all-black suits, and so on. Music stars like David Bowie and Marilyn Manson, both men and women, often wear high heels and clothing that allow individuals to explore fashion and style in a more independent and liberated manner. During the Gothic period, there was a trend for men's upper garments to become increasingly shorter, resulting in a "fitted upper body with an A-line shape from the waist down forming an upward triangle" for both men's and women's clothing [6]. This visual style is consistent with the gothic architecture. The subsequent development of goth has evolved into the modern gothic style. Breaking free from the traditional Gothic style of bands, various different branches of Gothic styles have been developed. Punk goth often continues the characteristics of gothic bands, using elements such as rivets, safety pins, and leather to express a rebellious, heavy metal, neutral, and free anti-traditional style. Cyber goth incorporates elements of technology and fantasies about the future technological world, combining metallic reflective fabrics, LED light materials for accessories, and some biochemical elements like gas masks. Finally, there is the classic romantic goth style, most commonly seen in the Lolita fashion in Japanese culture. It continues the exaggerated skirt of the medieval noble silhouette

with lace trimmings, waistbands, high heels, shirts, and cloaks. It is a profound, mysterious, and romantic style that combines Gothic architecture from the Middle Ages with art from the Renaissance period and a rebellious modern spirit. In romantic goth black is the main colour tone; sometimes mixed with dark colors such as white, purple, red, or dark green. Luxurious fabrics such as lace, satin, and velvet are also popular, paired with silver jewellery to create a mysterious yet cool atmosphere. Gothic style inherently embodies qualities such as mystery, exaggeration, and metallic sense, vividly presenting retro gorgeous styles from the medieval Gothic era along with an alternative mysterious vibe [5].

## 2.2 Subculture in the Digital Age

With the increasingly open nature of the Internet environment, people have gradually gained access to a greater variety of information channels. As a result, an increasing number of cultural styles that differ from the mainstream are being created. Young people are increasingly pursuing personalized development and have gradually formed many small circles that resonate with their emotions. Within these small circles, they have created a cultural form that both cooperates with and resists mainstream culture, known as "subculture" [7]. Subcultural style is a subordinated and marginalized youth group's attempt to resist mainstream culture by using stylized or alternative symbols as carriers, thus establishing a subcultural identity distinct from that of their parents' generation [8]. Taking goth style as an example, goth enthusiasts express their gender styles through this subculture, such as portraying powerful female images, male figures wearing high heels and skirts, and breaking the binary gender with neutral images. New media provides a platform for the development of subcultures, and media technology influences the way information is disseminated. The internet has changed the discourse structure and social status of young people, creating favorable conditions for the dissemination of youth subcultures. Subcultures utilize various online media to grow rapidly across time and space restrictions. With the support of technologies such as 5G, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence, rapid updates in subcultural content have become possible. At the same time, digital technology can be used to accurately target specific groups of people, helping young people quickly find their own social clusters and continuously promote the rapid dissemination of subcultures while achieving timely information dissemination and interactive development [9]. The cultural expression space constructs a "utopia" outside of societal competition beyond single evaluation systems which allows young people to easily obtain self-identity recognition. Moreover, it continually consolidates cultural identity recognition within a relatively relaxed evaluation system. Modern information technology has always been the main means for disseminating youth subcultures [10].

## 3 Identity

On the internet, each individual has an equal voice and status, regardless of gender. Both men and women can express their opinions through social platforms, and the collision of user ideologies includes gender attitudes, allowing the voices of non-binary individuals to be heard by the public. The emergence of a non-binary attitude has torn apart traditional gender definitions and aesthetics, showcased a diverse flow of gender qualities and provided an opportunity for rewriting gender concepts in cyberspace [11]. Non-Binary Gender (NBGQ) refers to the gender identity that goes beyond the traditional binary of male or female. Individuals who identify as NBGQ may be a mix of genders, or they may feel that they do not have a gender at all. Their gender identity is characterized by a "fluid" or "unidentified" state, and may simply involve a rejection of the binary gender norms. The term non-binary encompasses individuals who have more than one gender identity at the same time or at different times, such as bigender; those who have no specific gender identity or identify as neutral, such as agender or neutrois; individuals whose gender identity includes multiple elements or mixes of genders, such as polygender, demiboy, and demigirl; and those whose gender changes fluidly over time, known as genderfluid. In the traditional binary gender stereotypes, society has labelled women as "weak" and differentiated them from men using concepts such as gentleness, fragility, and

virtue. However, binary gender is only based on biological sex. There is no innate gender identity in human society; rather, it is gradually cultivated during the process of growth. After social construction, individuals develop into men and women and acquire gender identity. Although sex is predetermined at birth, gender is neither innate nor static; it is a product influenced by social interaction [12]. Psychologist Judith Butler clearly distinguished the concept of social gender from biological sex in *Gender Trouble*. She points out that social gender is culturally constructed. It is neither a causal result of biological sex, nor as fixed on the surface as biological sex [13]. Since 2000, modern society has entered into a postmodern era, which opposes uniformity, aesthetics, and centrality. Instead, it dreams of the equal coexistence of various things by endowing them with pluralism, anti-aesthetics, and marginal value [14]. Non-binary individuals not only differ from the mainstream and the public in terms of gender cognition, but they should also have equal rights to self-expression and individual discourse. However, dissent and exclusion towards non-binary genders still dominate in today's society. Beyond the internet background, expressing one's non-binary gender attitude in public settings still faces numerous criticisms and discrimination. The goal of postmodern feminism is to transcend the binary of "sex/gender" and establish a female voice based on multiple differences [15]. Moreover, the externalization of dressing can quickly help non-binary individuals to transition their style, allowing them to shift from one symbolic role to another. These symbols can represent strong, gentle, independent, beautiful, and resilient qualities - any traits they wish to embody and express as individuals [16].

## **4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Researcher Characteristics**

This research aims to study the relationship between subcultural styles, such as goth style, and gender diversity expression and the data was collected through interviews. The interviewee, referred as Z, is a blogger who expresses her gender identity in a cyber goth style and was found on an internet platform. Z is a 26-year-old cyber goth dancer and industrial DJ. Her biological sex is female, but she has experienced gender dysphoria and now she expresses a non-binary image through the cyber goth style that differs from traditional femininity.

### **4.2 Interview Questions Design**

The interview is a semi-structured interview, in which questions about clothing style as a means of expressing gender information were used as the starting point to ask the interviewees about three aspects: clothing and gender expression, cultural influences and gender symbols, as well as the transmission of gender information. The first question is "Which design elements of gothic clothing do you think play a key role in conveying gender information?" The purpose of setting this question is to investigate whether clothing plays a decisive role in expressing gender. Investigating whether clothing serves as a tool or a necessity in the gender expression of non-binary individuals. As a cyber goth dancer, Z has collaborated and exchanged ideas with numerous cyber goth enthusiasts from different countries on the internet. In order to investigate whether clothing of the same style will have different gender connotations in different cultural backgrounds, the second question was posed: "Have you experienced differences in the gender symbolism of gothic clothing in different cultural backgrounds?" Last but not the least, the question "How do you think the gothic style helps people express their gender?" was set to gain a deeper understanding of how style clothing plays a role among non-binary and subculture enthusiasts.

### **4.3 Data Collection**

The interview was conducted twice. The first interview lasted approximately one hour, during which the interviewee provided general opinions without clear direction or deep reflection. The second

interview, lasting three hours, included additional questions that prompted deeper thinking and ultimately led to more conclusive results. The purpose of the first interview was to introduce the topic of this study. It became apparent that the interviewee had never previously considered exploring the relationship between fashion styles and gender diversity expression. Therefore, after the initial simple interview, a two-day break was given to guide the interviewee towards deeper reflection.

The interview received a combination of written and audio responses, which will be transcribed into text and translated into English. Finally, a content analysis is used to analyze the relationship between clothing and the expression of gender diversity.

#### **4.4 Ethics**

The research process poses no risk to the participants. Participants have the right to be informed and participate voluntarily, with their privacy and rights protected. The research is conducted anonymously. Data collection is solely for the purpose of this study and will not be used for any other purposes. The collected data will be securely stored and will not be disclosed to others.

### **5 Result**

For some non-binary gender groups, clothing is simply a means of expressing personal style and does not play a decisive role in gender expression. As Z stated, "The role of conveying gender information ultimately depends on the difference in gender and body shape. There is still a distinction in clothing. It all comes down to individual preference." When clothing serves as a vehicle for expressing personal style, does it really help to express one's gender? The answer is negative. It only helps individuals understand what suits them and what doesn't, as quoted from Z. Therefore, the development of subcultural styles of clothing is not the determining factor for the phenomenon of gender diversity; it is simply a means for non-binary individuals to express their personal preferences and styles.

However, for enthusiasts of gothic style, gothic clothing challenges the binary gender norms imposed on clothing by mainstream society. It emphasizes that gender is not a fixed concept but rather fluid and diverse. In terms of cyber gothic fashion design, this group tends to prefer different styles based on individual preferences. Accessories such as PVC material, goggles, and gas masks better convey the technological and powerful aesthetic desired by cyber goth wearers, which contrasts with the design elements found in mainstream women's clothing.

The gothic style is more symbolic of neutrality or gender fluidity, breaking the traditional binary definition of gender. It encompasses non-binary genders such as genderfluid and agender, as well as neutrois. Through the expression of dark and mysterious gothic style, different genders are represented in a more unified and similar fashion. "I think it might be better to look at relevant musicians in the gothic music scene," during the interview Z mentioned two typical gothic musicians - the band The Crue and Susie Sue, who are male and female respectively. "But their hair and outfits give off this unified, neutral, dark and steady vibe that feels so similar." The gothic style of clothing breaks the stereotypical image imposed on men and women by binary gender norms. Men can wear skirts, high heels, and corsets while women can express non-traditional strength and independence. Therefore, subcultural styles such as gothic fashion are more helpful in expressing gender fluidity and neutrality, allowing individuals to express their gender without being confined by traditional sex stereotypes.

The societal perception of the cyber gothic style is predominantly associated with male preferences, as enthusiasts of this subculture tend to express a sense of power and technology that deviates from traditional female imagery. Based on Z's social experience, "I remember the first time I went out shopping and had a meal in my cybergoth outfit, trying to blend in like a regular person. I was just trying to buy some lipstick when the cashier gave me this terrified look, thinking I was some kind of freak." The societal acceptance of cybergoth culture is not high, due to the heavy industrial nature and the expression of power as well as a cold atmosphere. Some people may perceive this as masculine attire. This reflects society's stereotypical gender impressions of cybergoth clothing. The

mainstream society has revealed a lower level of acceptance towards subcultural fashion styles and a decreased level of inclusivity towards non-binary individuals. However, Z has expressed their opinion on this phenomenon. "Yeah, because of all these biases and internet stuff, it just makes me even more determined to stick to my own ideas and keep creating my industrial dance pieces." In conclusion, subcultural styles such as goth fashion help non-binary individuals to break away from traditional gender stereotypes and express their gender identity.

## 6 Conclusion

With the rapid development of the internet, subcultural styles are beginning to become popular and are being taken seriously. In this era of the internet where everyone has an equal right to speak, the viewpoints and thoughts of non-mainstream groups are being considered by the public, gaining more social recognition. Under the influence of gender diversity ideology, individuals are able to correctly reassess and define their own gender, rather than being confined by traditional sex limitations. The development of the Internet has provided a sense of collective identity for each individual and, subtly, has made mainstream society more inclusive towards subcultural groups. The imposition of binary gender is no longer forced upon individuals. People can now identify with their own gender and bravely express themselves to the public through subcultural clothing. The internet has facilitated the spread and development of subcultural styles, increased societal acceptance of gender diversity, and provided a platform for subculture enthusiasts to express themselves. This study finds that subcultural fashion does not play a decisive role in gender expression but helps non-binary individuals express their style orientation and resist mainstream stereotypes. It is hoped that people can correctly understand and treat their own gender, free from the restrictions of mainstream society, and courageously express themselves.

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