The gothic folk devils strike back! Theorizing folk devil reaction in the post-Columbine era

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Folk devils have to date been significantly overlooked in previous studies of moral panics. While several studies have called attention to this problematic (Thornton and McRobbie 1995, De Young 2004, Lumsden 2009), no specific theoretical framework has been proposed for reading this dimension of a moral panic. This paper argues that a moral panic erupted over the gothic subculture following the horrific Columbine High School massacre of 20 April 1999. This paper subsequently offers a theoretical model for understanding how goths as folk devils reacted to their representation by the mainstream news media after this tragic event. Until the early 2000s very little scholarship had been produced on the gothic subculture. Instead researchers interested in the study of youth chose to focus on other subcultures, such as punk and club cultures. Although studies by Hodkinson (2002) and Brill (2008) have contributed comprehensive insights about goth to youth and subcultural studies, the subject of how goths have been the subject of moral panics has not been addressed in significant detail. This paper seeks to address this neglect, while also providing researchers interested in moral panics and youth culture a conceptual framework for better understanding folk devil reactions.

Keywords: youth culture; media; music; attitudes

Introduction

Cohen's (1972) analysis of how the mainstream news media of the 1960s framed the public skirmishes between the Mods and Rockers has been published in three editions and is regarded by some commentators as a 'classic' sociological study (Thornton and McRobbie 1995, Ungar 2001, Muggleton 2005). In 2002, Routledge publishers recognized the book's status with its publication of a special 30th anniversary edition.[1] Since this latest edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of the Mods and Rockers* was published, Cohen's (2002, p. 172) concluding prophecy that 'More moral panics will be generated, and other, as yet nameless, folk devils will be created' has continued to be fulfilled. 'Nasty girls' or violent young women (Barron and Lacombe 2005), methamphetamine users (Armstrong 2007), hoodie-wearing youth (Marsh and Melville 2008), MySpace and internet social networking sites (Marwick 2008), and Scottish boy racers (Lumsden 2009) are just some of the figures that have more recently joined the gallery of folk devils.

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While researchers from various social science disciplines have continued to embrace Cohen and indeed later scholars, such as Hall *et al.* (1978) or Goode and Nachman (1994) theories about moral panics, other commentators have called for a critical revision of the theory (Thornton and McRobbie 1995, De Young 2004, Critcher 2006). The issue of how folk devils or the 'person or group of persons [who] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' respond to how other members of society react to them is one such area that has not been explored in much detail within moral panic studies. Although Cohen (2002, p. 15) flirted with the notion of folk devil reaction when he posited that the Mods and Rockers were not 'creatures pushed and pulled by the forces of the societal reaction without being able to react back,' he elected not to develop this idea any further in his study.

This paper will specifically focus on folk devil reaction and use the moral panic that developed over the gothic subculture following the fatal shooting rampage at Columbine High School in the USA in April 1999 as its point of departure to advance a theoretical model for understanding how those who become folk devils during a moral panic react to and subsequently deal with immense negative public attention and their new-found allegedly deviant and threatening status. This paper draws on research conducted for a PhD study that investigated how the gothic subculture was represented in various media narratives between 1988 and 2004, and whether moral panic theory is still relevant to social researchers in the twenty-first century (Griffiths 2005).

Folk devil reaction: the story so far

Thornton's (1995) important contribution to youth and subcultural studies has been widely acknowledged by other academics working in these fields (Ueno 2003, Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003, Carrington and Wilson 2004, Gelder 2005). Thornton (1995, pp. 116–163) investigates how subcultural insiders, in her case participants in British dance club culture, responded to the impact and influence of the mass media and alternative forms of media during the late 1980s and early 1990s. She also revisits moral panic theory and takes Cohen to task on a number of issues.

First, Thornton criticizes Cohen for failing to examine media sources that existed outside the domain of mainstream publishing like magazines which might have been read by young Mods and Rockers. Thornton (1995, pp. 120–122) states that Cohen relied almost exclusively on newspapers published at the local and national level for his primary data and urges that this mistake should not be made by contemporary media researchers. With these comments in mind she posits that by the mid-1990s the media industry was characterized by three distinctive layers: 'mass,' 'niche,' and 'micro' media forms. While mass media is comprised of mainstream news television, public radio, and widely circulated daily newspapers; niche media are those publications that are produced by the music press (e.g. *NME* and *Melody Maker*) and 'style' magazines like *The Face* and *Q*. Thornton (1995, p. 137) explains that micro media are 'low circulating' media forms that help inform clubbers about forthcoming events. Fanzines, telephone information lines, email lists, internet archive sites, flyers advertising future club events, and even word-of-mouth are other forms of micro media. Importantly, Thornton's 'media typology' has provided

researchers with a much wider frame of reference for investigating moral panics (Hodkinson 2002, p. 154).

Thornton has also explored folk devil reaction in more detail with Thornton and McRobbie (1995, pp. 559–574). Thornton and McRobbie (1995, p. 566) argue that '"folk devils" can and do "fight back,"' and in some cases will even be supported by lobbies and campaigning experts or interest and pressure groups. Thornton and McRobbie (1995, p. 567) also urge moral panic researchers to 'acknowledge the perspectives and articulations of different sectors of society.' In doing so, scholars working in this field will clearly reflect how youth culture, society, and the media have changed significantly since the first edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* was published. For Thornton and McRobbie (1995, p. 566) the emergence of folk devils who fight back and groups who actively support them is 'an extremely significant development in political culture' and one worthy of further attention.

Folk devils' desire to oppose their demonization and gain support from others is also taken up by De Young (2004) in her study of day care ritual abuse moral panics in the USA. De Young uses the scholarship of Bourdieu (1984), in particular his concept of 'capital,' to inform her analysis. De Young (2004, pp. 106–112) suggests that 'social,' 'moral,' and 'cultural' capital was available to individuals who were accused of abusing children in day care centers in the USA during the 1980s and 1990s in the form of 'friends, supporters, and advocates.' She describes how this social network actively helped these folk devils resist their demonization through organizing numerous protests, letter-writing campaigns, and bake sales. Like Thornton and McRobbie (1995), De Young is particularly interested in how individuals who are not folk devils also become involved in the folk devil reaction process.

Lumsden (2009) has tackled the issue of folk devil reaction more recently in her PhD study on 'boy racers' who emerged as folk devils following a moral panic over their allegedly dangerous use of motor vehicles on the streets of Aberdeen, Scotland during the last decade. Recognizing that the Aberdeen boy racers were part of a wider moral panic in the UK over 'illegal street racing, speeding…and behaviors defined as "anti-social", such as noisy exhausts and car stereos,' Lumsden (2009, p. 2.2) examines how 'young car enthusiasts and modifiers' who became folk devils responded to their positioning as 'deviant and anti-social' in the Aberdeen news media. One form of folk devil reaction was evident in the way in which young car enthusiasts emailed their local media to contest how they had been represented and to also reject the negative 'boy racer' label (Lumsden 2009, p. 8.1). The car enthusiasts also engaged with local police to demonstrate that they were 'respectable' young car owners who followed road laws and also reported any young car enthusiasts who they felt were behaving in an anti-social manner or were compromising the rules of driving at Aberdeen Beach which had been established on car enthusiast websites.

Methodology

A mixed methodological approach was employed to investigate the moral panic that erupted over the gothic subculture after the Columbine High School shootings. Three primary methods were used to collect data. First Thornton's media typology was used as a framework to organize media articles that were collected between

mid-2001 and late 2004 from mass, niche, and micro media sources. To be included, magazine or news articles, television reports, interviews, and documentaries or posts on goth-related websites had to discuss a range of themes which included the alleged connections between the Trench Coat Mafia, the gothic subculture and the Columbine shootings, the idea that there was a link between goths, criminal activities and anti-social behavior, and issues relating to the mass media's representation or misrepresentation of goths.

The majority of the collected articles were news reports that were published by either *National Daily New Zealand* newspapers or online versions of mass-produced newspapers published in other countries. To find newspaper articles that had been published or archived online, multiple searches were carried out by using Internet search engines, such as *Google* and *Dogpile* in combination with search engines provided by online news providers. Using these search engines and a wide variety of words, phrases, and names, such as 'goths in the media' and 'goths + Columbine,' I collected a total of 390 articles that were produced by the mass, niche, and micro media in relation to the themes listed above. Of these, 74 were published by 12 different New Zealand newspapers. Articles or band interviews which came from niche media sources, such as *Kerrang!*, *Rolling Stone,* and *NME* were also collected.

'Cyberspace ethnography' (Hills 2002, pp. 172–181), an online research method which permits textual analyses of fans' interpretation of original media texts like television shows, was also used to collect relevant threads, posts, or comments from 111 goth-related websites, newsgroups, message boards, weblogs, and webrings or what Hodkinson (2002, p. 176) has called the 'goth web.' A total of 260 Columbine-related comments were collected from these sites. These comments were subsequently divided into different categories, which form the foundations of the folk devil reaction model that is advanced later in this paper.

Finally, 14 qualitative interviews were conducted with members of the Auckland goth scene over a two-year period.[2] Of these, nine were male and five female. Each interview was approximately 80 minutes long, and with the written consent of each participant, recorded on a dictaphone. While the ages of my subjects ranged from 16 to 32, most were in their mid-to-late twenties. Eleven of my participants described their ethnicity as either 'Pakeha' or New Zealand European.[3] Three of my participants acknowledged that they had a mixed or non-European ethnic background.

The Columbine gothic moral panic

On 20 April 1999 two young men went on a shooting spree at Columbine High School in Denver, Colorado in the USA in which 15 people were killed. The adolescent gunmen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who committed suicide at the end of the massacre, were students at the high school and also members of an unpopular group of Columbine students who called themselves the 'Trench Coat Mafia.' During the last decade scholars from various disciplines have offered a wide range of perspectives in relation to this tragic event. Bullying and high school violence (Killingbeck 2001, Larkin 2007), Columbine as a media event (Muschert 2002), the negative influence of popular culture on youth (Wright 2000, Gagne 2001, Morris 2003), the way mental health professionals responded to the shootings (Hall

et al. 2001) and gun control (Springhall 2008) are just some of the many topics that have been discussed through what could be called the 'Columbine lens.'

Additionally a number of researchers working in the field of youth and (post-) subcultural studies have considered how goths were represented by the mainstream news media in the wake of the Columbine massacre (Hodkinson 2002, Martin 2002, Barker and Oldridge 2003, Jenkins and Jenkins 2003, Punter and Byron 2004, Spooner 2004). However, rather than providing detailed analysis, these publications offer either a quick snapshot of how moral panic theory may be applied to the Columbine event or how narratives produced by the British and American mainstream news media tended to misrepresent goths following the shootings. While other examples could certainly be discussed, due to spatial constraints the following section focuses on the role of the mainstream news media and the formal control culture that developed to deal with gothic youth during what has been described as the 'post-Columbine era' (Watson 2002, p. 3). This will provide a context for the folk devil reactions that are discussed later in the paper.

During the week that followed the shootings, various television reports and a myriad of newspaper, and Internet news articles described how students at Columbine High School thought Harris and Klebold were goths and members of a group of 'outcast' students at the school who called themselves the 'Trench Coat Mafia.' These articles were published in the USA and other countries which include New Zealand and England. Approximately 60 articles which were published by the mass media in the aforementioned countries that portrayed goths in a negative or problematic light were collected for my PhD study. Some of the headlines for these articles included the following:

- 'Classmates describe shooters as obsessed with goth world: "Trench Coat Mafia" members treated as social outcasts' (Vanderbeken 1999).
- 'Giggling goths out for revenge' (McCulloch 1999).
- 'High school horror: brutality turns focus to gothic subculture' (Mallia 1999).
- 'Suspects deeply mired in gothic subculture' (Doyle 1999).

In addition to these articles, the American current affairs program *20/20*, which is broadcast by the ABC television network, ran a story on 21 April 1999 called 'The Goth Phenomenon' in which a range of additional claims were presented about the gothic subculture (*20/20*, 21 April 1999). Apart from reinforcing the claim that Harris and Klebold might have been involved with what they called the 'gothic movement,' the feature suggested that some goths had engaged in homicidal activity before the Columbine disaster and that goths were a new type of white suburban teenage gang that participated in self-mutilation. The belief that goths posed a potential threat to 'normal' Americans was reinforced in the report by Steve Rickard, a member of the Denver Police Department gang unit, who argued that most suburban areas in the USA were potentially affected by 'suburban groups like the gothic movement.' 'The Goth Phenomenon' was a significant mass media narrative as it was broadcast at both the American and international level. The *20/20* broadcast gained a 12.4 rating which in viewing figures translates to an audience of approximately 12.5 million American households (Sink 1999). It also screened in New Zealand on 22 April 1999 during a 6 pm bulletin run by *3 News*, a national television news broadcaster, under the segment title, 'Goths' (*3 News* 1999).

    As noted above, the New Zealand print media also published a number of articles that clearly described the Columbine shooters as goths in the week immediately after the Columbine tragedy. Significantly, the New Zealand news media's references to the Trench Coat Mafia were much less detailed than the American and British press. Although the New Zealand media narratives did not reveal any new information about the Columbine shooters, they show how various claims relating to Harris and Klebolds' status as goths were rapidly disseminated by the mass media at the international level within hours of the disaster striking. While the local news media did not link the gothic subculture to gangs, terrorism, and self-mutilation, Cohen's (2002, p. 27) notion of 'symbolization' was still evident in the way that goths and their clothing styles were connected to the Columbine tragedy, fascist culture, and a range of other anti-social practices.[4] The New Zealand news media's decision to focus on other issues related to the Columbine tragedy such as high school bullying or firearm availability to young people might have had a significant effect on how the moral panic over the gothic subculture failed to develop to the same extent in New Zealand as it did in the USA. The fact that New Zealand has a much smaller, less powerful media industry than the USA, might have also influenced this outcome.

    This stage of the Columbine tragedy can thus be interpreted as the 'inventory phase' of the moral panic that developed over the gothic subculture (Cohen 2002, pp. 19–30). In their attempt to make sense of the Columbine shootings, journalists, and other media commentators linked goths to terrorism, Charles and Marilyn Manson, self-mutilation, hostage-taking, gang culture, the Waco cult, the Oklahoma city bombing, Satanism, mass murder, ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, suicide, the Internet, video games, skinhead music, white extremism, and Adolf Hitler. Symbolization was also evident. Through the narratives produced by the mass media, the gothic subculture, its visual style, and how goths allegedly behaved were linked to an astonishing range of acts and figures that have become an intrinsic part of USA – and indeed the Western world's – criminal history. Much like the Mods and Rockers' anoraks and scooters, trench coats came to symbolize goth's status as a deviant subculture. The way in which goths in USA and other countries, including New Zealand, reacted to these claims about their subculture clearly demonstrate how from a goth perspective this aspect of the media inventory was driven by exaggeration and distortion. These reactions are examined shortly.

    The way in which other institutions within American society reacted to gothic youths or those who appeared to be associated with the gothic subculture after the Columbine shootings shows how a formal 'control culture' emerged to counter the threat that goths allegedly posed to other members of society (Cohen 2002, pp. 65–75). This was particularly evident in the high school arena. In the week immediately after the shootings students who wore black trench coats or black clothing were suddenly viewed as a threat to school security across the USA. While this attention was largely directed at goths attending high school, other students who were not a part of popular groups within the school social environment also started being regarded with suspicion and fear by fellow students (Goldberg 1999, p. A13). Here Cohen's (2002, pp. 64–65) 'widening of the net effect' was evident in the way that it was not only goths who became the center of attention.

    This change in attitude toward goths and other so-called 'outcast' students demonstrates how school staff members and other pupils began to actively assign blame, and direct control measures at those groups who were seen to be responsible

for the Columbine massacre. This abrupt shift in how students – especially goths – who wore black trench coats were treated by other members of the school body can be interpreted as an example of 'sensitization' at work (Cohen 2002, pp. 59–65).[5] By the end of April 1999 the ban on black trench coats and other symbols related to gothic fashion had been adopted by high schools in New Hampshire, Tennessee, New York, Alabama, Massachusetts, Florida, Ohio, and Maine.

Although the reaction at New Zealand high schools was no where near as extreme or widespread as in the USA, one of my interviewees discussed how staff and pupils at her high school in Auckland reacted toward her and her friends immediately after the Columbine shootings. Lily, who at 16 years of age was my youngest interviewee, noted that before the Columbine tragedy she and her friends who were between 13 and 14 years old at the time had had a fairly comfortable relationship with teachers and fellow students. However, after the massacre the goths at Epsom Girls Grammar suddenly found themselves on the receiving end of verbal abuse and threats of violence from other students.

In addition to this sudden shift in attitude one of the counselors at the school wrote a letter that was sent home to the parents of all of the gothic students at Epsom Girls Grammar, which asked whether they were familiar with the American Trench Coat Mafia. The letter also claimed that children who were goths 'trend toward self-mutilation and suicide,' and suggested that the female pupils might need counseling. Although her post-Columbine experiences were not as extreme as some American goths, the way that Lily and her friends were treated by some individuals at her school reveals that some gothic youths in New Zealand were subjected to a limited amount of surveillance and negative attention within the educational sphere. This example thus demonstrates how some aspects of the Columbine gothic moral panic were present to some degree in New Zealand.

Finally, the formal control culture to deal with goths was not only confined to the high school arena. From immediately after the massacre through to 2003 goths throughout USA were also arrested, suspended, ticketed, fined, threatened, and physically attacked because of their subcultural identity.[6] A city in the state of Missouri was even granted over US$200,000 in April 2002 to deal with the new gothic threat (Blue Springs Government 2002). Additionally some police departments in Mississippi, Ohio, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Missouri, and Tennessee vigorously pursued Steve Rickard's argument in *20/20's* 'Goth Phenomenon' report that goth was a gang-based subculture that should be subject to more research and increased police surveillance (Conte 2000).

'We're not gonna take it anymore!' a folk devil reaction model

Citing Anthony Gidden's sociological approach to theoretical thinking, Davidson and Tolich (1999, pp. 17–18) describe how a new theory should be able to shed light on 'circumstances beyond those it was originally developed to understand' and also be able to cultivate 'fresh perspectives' on a given subject. With these observations in mind the folk devil reaction model that I advance in this paper has been designed to both make sense of how members of the gothic subculture reacted during the Columbine gothic moral panic and also be relevant to other researchers who wish to investigate the issue of folk devil reaction in the future. I propose that the way folk devils react to how they have been portrayed by the mass media, and treated by the

control culture and other members of society after the event that triggers a moral panic may be divided into 'private' and 'public' folk devil reactions. Accordingly, these different types of reactions can convey a range of different attitudes or emotions on the part of the folk devil that might include anger, sympathy, fear, defensiveness, apathy, disbelief and in some cases, even positivity, or amusement.

I define 'private' folk devil reactions as those responses that are expressed or published in private between folk devils themselves. Private folk devil reactions may be expressed via a variety of mediums or media technologies, such as face-to-face conversations, phone or Skype calls, SMS/text messaging, email correspondence or posts/comments on websites, newsgroup pages, blogs, message boards, or social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace or Twitter that have been created or moderated by the folk devils themselves. Private folk devil reactions are not intended to be seen on a mass or society-wide level, but rather at a niche or micro-media level. I was able to access these private folk devil reactions as I was actively looking for them and also knew of them due to my PhD research.

'Public' folk devil reactions on the other hand are those responses that are specifically intended to be seen or heard by people who are not already involved or familiar with the group, community, or subculture that has triggered the moral panic in question. These public reactions can be either media-based (e.g. press statements, letters, or emails to television networks, newspapers, and journalists or interviews with the mass media), expressed in public or community spaces (e.g. protests or vigils) or designed to help those who have been affected by the event(s) that initiated the moral panic (e.g. fund-raising activities, charity drives, or benefit gigs). This model also recognizes that folk devil reaction may even be positive. In some cases, for example, folk devils may choose to thank people such as journalists who are positioned outside their group for how they have represented them. Such reactions may be described as 'affirmative' folk devil reactions. This folk devil reaction model is subsequently applied to how goths reacted during the post-Columbine period in the USA and New Zealand.[7]

The private gothic reaction

With the exception of my New Zealand examples which were gleaned from interviewing Auckland goths, the majority of the private folk devil reactions that I collected were posted on gothic websites, goth newsgroup sites, and personal web pages. These private reactions predominantly took the form of participants distancing themselves from Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold via written statements that stressed goths were not murderers or criminals, not a violent subculture or gang, did not engage in fascist activities or promote racial hatred and were not Marilyn Manson fans. While a significant proportion of these responses were from goths living in the USA, private reactions that came from goths residing in Canada, France, Holland, Finland, Germany, England, South Africa, and Scotland were also found. The following list of private gothic reactions to the Columbine media coverage is based on a combination of interviewing goths from Auckland and cyberspace ethnography:

- There were hours of angry phone and face-to-face conversations between individuals who identified as goths.
- Many gothic websites posted statements that distanced the subculture from the shooters and also expressed sympathy for the victims of the Columbine tragedy.
- There were random posts by goths on personal web pages and live journals or posts, and discussions between goths on various goth message boards and newsgroups like *alt.gothic*, *alt.gothic.fashion*, and *uk.people.gothic*.
- A number of American gothic websites banded together to form a webring called 'Goths Against Media Exploitation' (G.A.M.E.). G.A.M.E.'s moderator invited other gothic websites to join the G.A.M.E. webring as a way to debunk the post-Columbine media stereotypes about the subculture. Participating websites carried the G.A.M.E. banner on their sites.
- Some goth websites posted humorous stories which parodied the mass media's misrepresentation of the subculture. One such story suggested that (fictional) goth gangs called the 'Blaeds' and the 'Crypts' drove around 'lowriding in their respective batmobiles' and enjoyed 'scaring preschoolers, drive by mopings and grave robberies' ('Gothic Gangs,' http://www.angelfire.com/la/hoo drathoochiemama/gangs.html).
- Several goth bands used music to express how they felt about the mass media's coverage. A goth band from Tallahassee, Florida called the Crüxshadows included a special remix of their song 'Leave Me Alone' called the 'Shaft 20/20' mix on their 2001 American tour album called *Echoes and Artifacts*. The remixed version of 'Leave Me Alone' used samples of the *20/20* television segment that was discussed earlier.
- Members of the Christchurch goth scene in New Zealand felt that the New Zealand news media was guilty of reproducing American media narratives about Columbine in an uncritical manner. Some cyber-literate Christchurch goths subsequently attempted to 'punish' Christchurch newspapers by 'e-bombing' their websites.[8]

Under closer inspection the private reactions clearly demonstrate how many goths felt the narratives produced by the mainstream news media about their subculture in relation to the Columbine massacre were misinformed and imbued with exaggeration. While the statement that follows provides a personal perspective from Alicia Porter (1999), a female American goth, it is also representative of private gothic reactions that were collected for my PhD study:

> As I read the reports of the Littleton tragedy, I can't help but cry ... My sincerest condolences and sympathy extends to everyone involved ... As people struggled to understand why it happened, some students came forth to describe the gunmen as 'gothic.' From what I have read of the suspects, I see little to no connection to the gothic lifestyle, other than the fact that they wore black trench coats – a common fashion style of goths...There is absolutely no connection between gothic culture as a whole and racism, fascism, bigotry, or Adolf Hitler. Goths are stereotypically non-violent people...I personally have been deeply upset by this incident. I think I can speak for the gothic community in saying that we are all as horrified as anyone else. (http://www.gothics.org/subculture/statement.php, 21 April 1999)

The public gothic reaction

While the public reactions continued to reinforce the argument that goth was not an immoral and dangerous youth subculture, they differed from the private reactions in the way that goths specifically targeted and actively approached the media, and a range of people and organizations who were outside the subculture. In some cases goths also received invitations from journalists to be interviewed. Goths from USA, New Zealand, Britain, and Canada were particularly active in trying to construct positive images of goth within the public domain and non-subcultural media formats after the Columbine massacre. In the sections that follow I argue that members of the gothic subculture provided two main types of public reaction, that of media and community-based formal reactions. Given it would be difficult here to adequately cover all of the public reactions that were offered by goths in the countries noted above I focus instead on examples from USA and New Zealand.

The way that American goths arranged or agreed to take part in interviews with mainstream radio, television, and online news providers was one outlet that goths used to express their anger at how the mass media had incorrectly linked the subculture to the Columbine shooters. While interviews with goths from New Hampshire, Kansas, Arizona, Washington, New Jersey, California, and New York primarily focused on the subculture's general frustration at being associated with Harris and Klebold, participants also provided additional insider information about the subculture and their respective local goth scenes. Some of these interviews led to the publication of articles in daily newspapers like the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Post* and also *Time* magazine.

This mass media-based defense of the subculture was further strengthened by other American goths who issued official press releases, wrote letters to editors of mainstream newspapers or sent emails to online news providers and television programs such as *20/20*. A total of 68 such letters/emails were collected. Much like the private gothic reactions these responses challenged how the mass media in the USA had misrepresented the subculture, especially in reports that suggested goths were violent adolescents who exhibited an interest in fascist culture. When considered together as a collection of voices these public gothic reactions offer an interesting range of positions. Just under half of the letters/emails were written by women, and while the majority of the writers signalled that they were goths in their mid-to-late twenties, some respondents noted how they were in their thirties. Some of these goths also pointed out that although they lived in the USA they also identified as Chinese or Asian, African American, and Hispanic or Portuguese goths. By drawing attention to their gender, age, and ethnic background these goths aimed to show the journalists whom they were targeting that goths should not necessarily be characterized as white teenage males.

Blood and money: community reactions

In addition to the media-based responses that were discussed above a number of gothic groups in the USA organized a variety of events that may be described as 'community' folk devil reactions. This dimension of the public gothic reaction was less media-driven and focused more on interacting with members of the public or becoming involved in activities to benefit communities other than the gothic

subculture such as charity drives or raising donations for various Columbine-related memorial funds.

Goths from Utah held a picnic on 25 April 1999 in Liberty Park in Salt Lake City to demonstrate their opposition to the Columbine massacre, atrocities committed during the Kosovo conflict and police violence in Utah. The goths involved handed out anti-violence ribbons and cookies to insiders who attended as well as members of the public who spoke to the picnic group (Utah n.d.). Several days' later goths from Tulsa, Oklahoma, hosted a candlelight vigil to remember the victims of the Columbine tragedy at the City Hall Plaza in downtown Tulsa. During the vigil members of the group 'spoke out against the media ignorance' that had been affecting goths since the mass media started to cover the events at Columbine (Dark 1999). Similarly another group of goths held an outdoor vigil at the Denver state Capitol on 24 April 1999 to show the public that goths were against violence. The *Denver Post* published an article on their website about the gathering entitled 'Notes from a day of mourning' which acknowledged how the group of Denver goths were praying for peace as well as those who had been killed or injured during Harris and Klebold's deadly rampage (Denver 1999).

Members of the *Gothic.Net* website also played a central role in this gothic public relations campaign through establishing a donation drive called 'Blood and Money' which was supported by another goth group from Texas called the 'Desert Goths.' Although this charity was initially inspired by the Columbine tragedy and the mainstream media's misrepresentation of the gothic subculture it also aimed to assist all victims of unnecessary violence via goths throughout USA donating blood or money for hospital-related costs to the country's national Red Cross (http://www.gothic.net/benefit, April 1999). *Gothic.Net* (1999) also printed 100 short sleeved T-shirts to raise additional funds for the American Red Cross. The T-shirts were US$10 plus a shipping fee and were created as a 'response to the media's shoddy portrayal of goths' (Anonymous n.d.). The statement, 'Not a Racist, Not a Satanist, Haven't Killed Anyone Yet,' was printed on the front of the T-shirt while the back was adorned with a *Gothic.Net* logo and an image of a gothic-style figure.

Several goth scenes in the USA also organized benefit gigs after the Columbine shootings to raise money for various Columbine memorial funds and the American Red Cross. Boston goths, for example, arranged the '15 Lilies' benefit show on 20 June 1999 at a venue called The Machine. The event offered attendees a potluck dinner and access to an auction of Boston artists' work and gothic collectibles. The '15 Lilies' gig was held to raise money for the Columbine Memorial Fund and to also show support for adolescent goths who had faced increased regulation (i.e. the formal gothic control culture) in the months after the shootings (http://www.15lilies.org, April 1999).

Public gothic reaction in New Zealand

Like their American counterparts a group of Auckland goths were also active in confronting New Zealand's national news media. Three of my interviewees described how they sent *3 News* a number of 'harsh' emails which criticized the television station for including *20/20's* 'Goth Phenomenon' story in one of their primetime news broadcasts several days after the Columbine tragedy. Mel added that her decision to challenge *3 News* was influenced by the fact that some of her goth friends

had started being 'harassed on the street' and that a younger female goth had rung 'me up in tears because her mother was giving her grief about her interest in goth.' To their surprise Mel, Rupert, and Helen were invited by *3 News* to provide an insiders' point of view about the New Zealand gothic subculture (*3 News* 1999). They described in some detail how a *3 News* crew went about constructing their television segment and indicated their interview went fairly well. Rupert, a goth in his mid-thirties who has also been an occupational therapist for many years, acknowledged how the interview presented a useful opportunity to reject the mass media's claims that goths were white males who subscribed to fascist ideology. In their television interview they pointed out that Mel was a gothic Maori woman and that their friend Morgan was a goth of New Zealand European, Native American, and Caribbean descent.[9]

Helen New (1999) also wrote a letter to the editor of the *New Zealand Herald* to discuss how the gothic subculture had been mistreated by the mainstream media in the wake of the Columbine shootings. Helen, who was the President of the University of Auckland Gothic Society in 1999, asserted that goths were not violent, did not respect Hitler and were instead friendly, 'peace-loving people.' Her letter to the editor which was published under the heading, 'Nothing to fear from goths,' in the weekend edition of the *New Zealand Herald* on 24–25 April 1999 also asked members of the public not to fear the gothic subculture.

In May 1999 a second group of Auckland goths that included my interviewee Ewan approached a (now defunct) radio station called Channel Z about doing a 'goth special' in which they would confront the negative media attention that the subculture had received post-Columbine. Channel Z, a commercial radio station that targeted the New Zealand youth market, agreed to the request and invited the group to join DJ Martin Bradbury during one of his popular Sunday night talkback shows. While Bradbury led the discussion callers rang in to ask his guests questions that predominantly revolved around the relationship between the gothic subculture, religion, fashion styles, and music.

When compared to the vast range of other public responses that were offered by American goths the aforementioned public folk devil reactions by New Zealand goths could at first glance appear to be somewhat insignificant. Here it must be acknowledged, however, that while a moral panic did develop in relation to the gothic subculture inUSA, New Zealand goths were subject to far less harassment and scrutiny by those outside the subculture. Earlier it was noted that New Zealand's national news media elected to concentrate on other aspects of the Columbine shootings. Had widely circulating daily newspapers focused more specifically on the gothic dimensions of the Columbine tragedy the local subculture's public level of reaction might have been – or had to have been – more comprehensive. While it is only speculation, the enthusiastic and quick public responses of goths like Ewan, Mel, Rupert, and Helen might have helped prevent a full-blown gothic moral panic from developing in New Zealand.

Folk devil reaction as cultural politics

The folk devil reactions that have been discussed in this paper have shown how goths from the USA and New Zealand responded to the mass media's misrepresentation of their subculture and the formal gothic control culture that developed in the wake of

the Columbine High School shootings of 20 April 1999. This final section considers whether the gothic subculture's reactions can be interpreted as a form of 'cultural politics,' which revolves around the idea that groups who have either purposively positioned or involuntarily found themselves outside mainstream culture are able to actively 'redescribe' themselves (Barker 2000, p. 355) or challenge what Hall (1996, p. 442) has referred to as the 'relations of representation.' The decision to adopt this particular approach rather than subscribing to the more traditional model of 'symbolic' resistance that is associated with the 'CCCS approach' (Muggleton 2000, p. 3) recognizes how some theorists have begun to argue that a new, post-subcultural studies framework is needed for the twenty-first century (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003). Finally, this section contemplates the differences between the private and public folk devil reactions that have been examined in this paper and if it is possible to speak of a 'post-Columbine' gothic identity.

Barker (2000, p. 355) has drawn attention to how the notion of cultural politics is concerned with representation, identity politics, and 'questions of cultural power.' Using examples that include the way in which African Americans have challenged their portrayal as criminals and women have repositioned themselves as equal to men, Barker (2000, p. 355) acknowledges how cultural politics have also 'involve[d] the struggle over "naming" and the power to redescribe ourselves.' Importantly Barker's definition reflects how scholars interested in the subject of cultural politics have explored a range of issues that revolve around the various relationships between representation, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Hall's work on black cultural politics has been particularly influential on this branch of cultural studies (Morley and Chen 1996). Hall (1996, p. 442) contends that the marginalization of black peoples in Britain laid the foundations for the eventual emergence of a black cultural politics that was 'designed to challenge, resist and, where possible, to transform the dominant regimes of representation – first in music and style, later in literary, visual, and cinematic forms.' He goes on to suggest that the cultural politics that accompanied this critique were underpinned by various strategies that included 'the contestation of the marginality, the stereotypical quality, and the fetishized nature of images of blacks, by the counter-position of a "positive" black imagery' (Hall 1996, p. 442). Hall (1996, p. 442) adds that these tactics aimed to transform what he terms the 'relations of representation.'

Gross (2001, p. 412) has similarly discussed how gay men and lesbian women have been portrayed by mainstream television programs and newspapers as 'abnormal,' 'weak and silly or evil and corrupt' or as 'victims' or 'villains.' Gross (2001, pp. 415–421) outlines how gay men have employed a number of potentially subversive tactics as a way of 'undermining the hegemonic power of media images.' He identifies how one of these 'gay strategies' has included members of queer communities obtaining 'the necessary resources with which to tell our own stories… in our own words,' a tactic which has subsequently enabled gay men and lesbians to 'become the creators and not merely the consumers of media images' (Gross 2001, pp. 419–421). Gross (2001, p. 421) concludes that although 'the marginalized minority audience' faces obvious difficulties, they still have the power to address the dilemma of media representation via 'the cultivation of alternative channels' and by also putting pressure on the mainstream media to deliver 'equitable and respectful treatment.'

Hall and Gross's scholarship provides an extremely useful point of departure for assessing whether the folk devil reactions that have been discussed in this paper can be interpreted as a form of cultural politics. There is no denying that individuals and groups from non-white backgrounds and queer communities have endured much more extreme levels of discrimination and hatred than goths. Importantly what these minority identities do have in common is that they have at some point been misrepresented by the mass media and also positioned at the center of various moral panics. Much like these other marginalized groups, goths have attempted to address the relations of representation that adversely affected their subculture during the post-Columbine period.

Where black artists and gay people have used what Downing *et al.* (2001, p. 9) has described as 'radical media' (e.g. music, film, theatre, and pornography) to produce positive, reaffirming images, and also speak about their marginalization, this paper has demonstrated how goths used a variety of media sites to contest how they were depicted by the mass media in relation to the Columbine massacre. Through writing letters or emails to newspapers and their use of newsgroups and websites, not to mention their support of various Columbine-related charities, members of the gothic subculture actively attempted to reposition themselves both publicly and privately. The very act of confronting the mass media and the relations of representation in order to redescribe or explain to those outside the subculture what goth was really about arguably fits well with Barker, Hall, and Gross's notion of cultural politics and indeed Thornton and McRobbie's (1995, p. 270) interest in the increasing politicization of folk devils.

In arguing that the gothic subculture adopted a form of cultural-based politics post-Columbine, I am well aware that this conclusion directly challenges Hodkinson's (2002, p. 76) argument that 'the goth scene involve[s] no external political objectives.' Even though he is suspicious of there being any obvious links between politics and goth, it is worth noting that Hodkinson (2002, p. 159) does point out that the way the mainstream media portrayed goths 'served to unite them and engender reinvigorated camaraderie' in the wake of the April 1999 shootings. Hodkinson (2002, p. 173) also suggests that the 'survival' of the group is an important subcultural ideal where goth is concerned. While I agree that goth is not driven by an explicit political agenda as in the case of the anarcho-punk subculture (Griffiths 2004, p. 234), Hodkinson's comments help reinforce the conclusion that goths had to actively redescribe themselves at the level of cultural politics, or embrace the so-called politics of representation, in order to 'survive' or have the right to exist as a contemporary social group without fear of societal controls during the post-Columbine era.

The way in which the gothic subculture reacted to their post-Columbine representation is not without its limitations. Three of my interviewees noted that they did not take much notice of the Columbine media coverage and felt largely apathetic about the issue of media representation. Nik who was living in Sydney, Australia in April 1999 clearly remembered the news reports but thought while certainly tragic, it 'was just another massacre' in a growing list of high school shootings. Alternatively Soames pointed out that he did not take a lot of notice because he and his partner at the time were not particularly active in the Auckland goth scene and rarely attended goth events.

Another limitation was evident where the internet was concerned. Some of my interviewees were extremely positive about the role that the internet had played in the private and public gothic reactions. Mel, for example, stated that by using the websites, chatrooms or forums goths could at a 'grassroots level' circumvent the mainstream news media and consequently reach a global network – but only if enough people are aware of these niche and micro media sites. Other goths were, however, suspicious of how effective the internet could be in terms of changing peoples' negative perceptions of the subculture. Chris, for example, an IT professional specializing in network administration, acknowledged the internet had provided goths an alternative space in which to voice their concerns, but also conceded that when the 'average person' wishes to learn more about the background to a news story like the Columbine tragedy they may well choose to view websites run by major news corporations as opposed to small, niche or subculturally produced sites.[10]

Regardless of these alternative insider viewpoints, some goths argued that the increased visibility of goths in the wake of the Columbine massacre has ultimately benefited the subculture. Another participant in my study called Mary contended that it was perhaps easier to be a goth after Columbine compared to previous decades as while people from outside the subculture had become more interested in goth because of Columbine, there was now also a much wider range of media sources to consult if they wished to learn more about goth. Mary's fairly optimistic views about the subculture's changing fortunes in the post-Columbine era were also evident in several other gothic micro media articles. In February 2004, writing for the American webzine *Asleep by Dawn*, Pete Rogers (2004) suggested that the explosion in popularity of bands in the early 2000s such as Evanescence who have been described by those both inside and outside the gothic subculture as a goth band signified the beginning of a more comfortable relationship between goths and mainstream society (http://www.asleepbydawn.com). Rogers (2004) also claimed that Evanescence's popularity had the potential to help make life easier for adolescent goths both at school and with their families.

Is it possible then to speak of a post-Columbine gothic identity? While it is certainly applicable to some of the examples that have been discussed in this final section, even before the Columbine shootings the gothic subculture had been positioned at the center of multiple mainstream news narratives and subsequently misrepresented in the process (Shuker 2001, Griffiths 2005). Further, if the tragedy at Columbine High School had never happened this term would have never come into being. Rather than rejecting the notion of a post-Columbine gothic identity altogether, it thus seems more appropriate to employ this term where relevant and instead embrace goth 'historian' Mercer's (2002) general descriptor 'twenty-first century gothic' when discussing issues that relate to gothic identity in the first decade of the new millennium.

Finally, if those goths who did challenge the mass media's failure to provide an accurate portrayal of the subculture had not elected to offer an alternative goth-based perspective, the societal reaction in the wake of the Columbine gothic moral panic may have been significantly different or perhaps even more severe than it was.

Notes

1. The 1980 and 2002 editions of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* preserve the 1972 edition's original text. The only notable differences are the updated introductions by Cohen and page layout. References in this paper to Cohen's text follow the 2002 thirtieth anniversary edition.

2. The concept of 'scene' has been employed for decades by scholars as a term 'for local sites of cultural, particularly musical cultural, production, and consumption' (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004, p. 13). Discussing indie rock scenes, Stahl (2004) has suggested that a scene may be thought of as a 'matrix of sites, routines, networks, practices, events, and participants, a dense complex of activities and actors that...produce [specific] regional identities' (2004, p. 52). See Straw (1991), Harris (2000), Hesmondhalgh (2005), Kahn-Harris (2007) for further commentaries on the concept of 'scene.'

3. 'Pakeha' is a term used by Maori in New Zealand to describe New Zealanders who are of European origin or ancestry (Bell 2004, p. 122).

4. 'Symbolization' recognizes how specific words, figures, and objects can take on new connotations during a moral panic. Cohen (2002, p. 27) describes symbolization as a three-step process that takes place during the media inventory or third phase of a moral panic. First a word (i.e. 'Mod') takes on a delinquent or deviant status which is subsequently followed by specific objects associated with a particular group starting to symbolize the word in question. Accordingly the objects (i.e. clothing or haircuts) 'become symbolic of the [deviant] status' and ultimately take on 'wholly negative meanings' (Cohen 2002, pp. 27–28).

5. Cohen (2002, pp. 59–65) uses the concept of 'sensitization' to make sense of how after the Mods and Rockers' confrontations began, more general acts of hooliganism or rule breaking by young people across England began to be linked to the Mods and Rockers' behavior even though these incidents were not necessarily part of the evolving conflict between the two groups. In Cohen's moral panic model, sensitization is a way to better understand how members of society react or quickly become more sensitive and assign blame to what they see happening around them as a moral panic takes hold.

6. There were various hostile reactions against goths following the Columbine High School shootings, especially in North America. Within days of the massacre goths in Colorado started receiving hate emails and death threats. A young goth, for example, posted an account on the *slashgoth.org* forum about how he had been beaten so badly shortly after the Columbine shootings that he had required hospital attention (http://slashgoth.org/stories.php?story=74). A gothic single mother also living in Colorado received death threats via email and answer phone which called her a 'murderous bitch' and that her clothing business would be burnt down. Her son also experienced harassment at his school because his mother was a goth (http://www.smoe.org/lists/alloy/v04.n121). In another incident a goth from Arizona called Tryelis was physically attacked by members of a Hispanic gang several months after the shootings with rocks and a knife because he was a goth and what had happened at Columbine high school (http://www.livejournal.com/community/azgoths/85036.html). These examples are just a few of the accounts that were collected for my PhD research.

7. The first part of the subheading for this section is taken from the chorus of the song 'We're not gonna take it' by heavy metal band Twisted Sister (1984). While the chorus of the song ends with the line, 'We're not gonna take it anymore,' the verses of the song revolve around rebellion and encourages listeners to 'Fight the powers that be.' The song appeared on their 1984 album *Stay Hungry*.

8. 'E-mail bombing' is a form of computer-based attack that attempts to disrupt email accounts via sending a significant number of emails made up of 'meaningless data' or 'large file attachments' (Bocij 2004, pp. 232–233). Millions of messages may be sent to someone's email account during such an attack which may prevent the user having access to their account.

9. 'Maori' are the indigenous people of New Zealand (Huckle *et al.* 2008, p. 1616).

10. The relationship between goths and the IT sector was acknowledged by Dunja Brill in an interview with *The Guardian* in 2006 called 'I have seen the future – and it's goth.' In addition to noting that many goths are well educated and often become doctors, lawyers,

or bank managers, Brill suggests that 'goths are more likely to make careers in web design [and] computer programming.' Five of my 14 interviewees – all male – were employed in various branches of the New Zealand IT industry and earning very reasonable salaries. Most of the other participants – regardless of gender – were computer literate and had their own blogs, websites or high participation levels in the goth web. Goths' ability to proficiently engage with computer technology meant they were extremely well placed to use internet-based technology in the wake of the Columbine shootings to initiate private and public folk devil reactions.

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