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“Conforming to the Nonconformative”: Goth Culture at Penn State

COURTNEY BENEDETTO
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Russell Frank
Professor of Journalism
Thesis Supervisor

John Affleck
Professor of Journalism
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

Goth. It's a subculture identified by black clothing, black makeup, somber music and all things dark and dead. From an outside perspective, Goths look scary, unapproachable — anti-society, anti-establishment, anti-you. From my four years of studying journalism, I learned that people aren't always who they are perceived to be. And with my own familial ties to the Goth subculture, I wanted to get to the bottom of who these people are and why they love their counterculture. This journalistic work follows one of Penn State's newest clubs on campus: the Goth Club at Penn State. Each club member has their own story, yet they are united in their shared love for the macabre and each other. My goal with this thesis is to introduce the world to a group that seemingly wants attention by being different and defying societal norms. Who are the Goths? What do they stand for? These college-aged Goths may affirm or deny preconceived notions of the subculture, but their stories are full of twists and turns and contradictions. Follow me on my journey to understanding what it takes to exist within a dark and mysterious subculture on a college campus that already has its own cult-like traditions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I've never liked the color pink. Growing up, I thought that made me "cool." I loved the idea of being different, and to this day I still can't explain why turning up my nose at a popular color felt so good at such a young age. Maybe it's the liberation from societal norms that my 5-year-old self couldn't comprehend. Maybe I decided the hue didn't match my skin tone. Or maybe I just liked people's confused reactions when I said, "Pink? Ew," and they had assumed I'd want rainbows and unicorns on everything. For whatever reason, I loved hating pink.

At the age of 12, I didn't just hate pink. I wanted black combat boots and black nail polish to accompany my "Fall Out Boy" and "Panic! At The Disco" CDs. But my rebellion against normal culture ended there. After middle school, I decided I didn't really like nail polish, and I'm just a jeans-and-sweatshirt kind of girl. What I experienced was probably just a "phase," but not all angsty preteens can say the same.

My cousin Alyssa didn't just go through a phase of wearing black eyeliner as a teenager. She's about eight years older than me and has also always hated pink. She also hates blue. And yellow. And green. And all bright colors. She has been wearing black for as long as I can remember, and that will probably never change. Alyssa got married on Halloween weekend in 2022. Intricate black lace cascaded like a spider web down her ivory gown. Her long black hair hung over one shoulder, revealing the half of her head that was shaved. We bridesmaids walked down the aisle in deep-purple dresses with our black shawls waiting for us at our seats. The

ceremony took place under the dome of an observatory, and guests took home black coffee and dark tree centerpieces.

Alyssa is Goth. I'm familiar with the term through her, but I never understood what makes Goths different from punks, emos, etc. Alyssa strongly identifies with the subculture and, I realized after attending her beautifully dark wedding, I wanted to know why. I wanted to know why my phase was just a phase, but I'm even more interested in what draws people to a lifestyle of the macabre. What defines a subculture? What is Goth?

What Makes a Subculture

Before diving into the State College Goth scene, it's important to understand what Goth is at its core. It's considered a subculture, but what exactly does that mean?

Paul Hodkinson, a sociologist and professor at the University of Surrey, published an ethnographic study of Goth in the 1990s titled "Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture." Hodkinson breaks the term subculture down into four parts: consistent distinctiveness, identity, commitment and autonomy. He said a subculture shares a set of values that are "distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent" (Hodkinson 30). Goth has its own values, and the dark fashion choices have become a consistent and distinctive trait of the culture. Their homogeneity helps them feel comfortable in their community. The Goth subculture also fosters a strong sense of identity. No matter the geographical boundaries, these like-minded individuals can find and relate to each other in online spaces such as Reddit and Discord. To commit to a subculture means to commit to a certain lifestyle associated with that group, and Goth exhibits this quality. Most Goths aren't just 12-year-olds experimenting with black nail polish; rather they're people

who make darkness their personality and way of life. In Hodkinson's words, a subculture isn't a subculture without autonomy—its own “events, consumer goods and communications” (Hodkinson 32). Goth has its own market for clothing and merchandise, and often clubs and event venues host “Goth nights” for people within the subculture.

Evolution of Goth

In the late 4th century, the Goths were a group of Germanic people who invaded the Roman Empire and contributed to its collapse. The word “Goth” is thought to be related to the Proto-Germanic verb *geuta*, which means “to pour.” The term surfaced again when Italian writers from the Renaissance era compared medieval architecture to the brutal Gothic tribes. Roman architecture at this time featured rounded arches and smooth columns. The pointed arches and buttresses of the architectural style that followed were considered more barbaric and less sophisticated, thus earning the name of the people who contributed to the Roman empire's demise. The gothic literature genre then emerged because the stories were inspired or set within gothic architecture. The way “Goth” is used now is more related to the aesthetic of dark castles and spooky medieval ruins, but the term was used to describe music starting in the 1980s. If you ask Goths what sparked their subculture, it always comes back to music. In the post-punk era of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Goth emerged as a new sound with rock undertones accompanied by dark, melancholic melodies. Hodkinson noted that David Bowie in the 1970s, and Joy Division and Siouxsie and the Banshees in the 1980s were some of the first bands to create this Goth sound. Many consider Bauhaus's single “Bela Lugosi's Dead” from 1979 as the first Gothic rock song.

Several bands with a similar melancholy and ethereal sound performed in a London nightclub called The Batcave in 1982, which attracted music journalists. According to Hodkinson, the term “Goth” was used by band members of Southern Death Cult and Joy Division’s producer Tony Wilson. David Dorrell of the New Musical Express publicized the term and made it stick as the label for the emerging subculture. And not long after it was used to describe the style of music, “Goth” applied to the fashion made popular by the members of the Goth bands.

A common theme among band members of The Cure and Bauhaus was wearing black clothing, dark makeup, and fabrics like leather and fishnets. The Cure’s Robert Smith was famous for his unruly, teased hair and for wearing eyeliner and lipstick on stage. He also wore jewelry and skirts, blurring gender stereotypes with his fashion choices. To this day, Robert Smith denies that he and The Cure are Goth, but his affinity for dark eyeliner, pale face makeup, chain jewelry and cross-dressing on stage still inspires modern Goths. Siouxsie Sioux was known for her dark, angular brows, dramatic eyes and deep contour for her makeup look. She also teased her short black hair into a “bat’s nest” on the top of her head. Fans of the music adopted the dark fashion, becoming a more physically recognizable group of people.

As a group with a passion for the same music and fashion sense, Goths devised a set of universal values as well. The somber music and lyrics turned into a shared appreciation of darkness and sad things. The macabre makeup, mimicking pale corpses with sunken eyes, inspired a new attitude surrounding death, one that finds the concept beautiful. Goths are drawn to darkness and things that challenge societal norms. Every Goth has their own definition of “Goth” and a different reason why they’re drawn to the subculture, but most agree that their natural curiosity and appreciation of death and the dark aesthetic is what lures them to Goth

music and fashion. In “This Modern Goth (Explains Herself),” her contribution to “Goth: Undead Subculture,” Rebecca Schraffenberger explains Goths’ affinity for darkness. According to Schraffenberger, “a Goth sees beauty in what is dreadful and forbidding. All this is bound up within a creative personality and an acute aesthetic sense” (Goodlad 124). As a Goth herself, she explains that most Goths come from a creative background and find dark things aesthetically pleasing and romantic, in the same way that Gothic literature is romantic.

On top of being drawn to all things spooky, Goths, Schraffenberger admits, like the idea of being different and challenging societal norms. Spooking people with their unusually dark makeup and clothing appeals to them. They simultaneously don’t care what other people think of them and enjoy the reactions they get from bystanders. Goths also look down on “normal” society for being conforming and flawed. “Your typical Goth is all too aware that people are cruel and selfish and ready to deceive” (Goodlad 124). Goths have negative outlooks on human nature and the way people have been mistreating the Earth. To them, the future is always grim. Goths’ distaste for selfish humans often translates to a socially liberal ideology. This is partly why some Goths are known for a punk anti-establishment mentality as well as their love of DIY fashion and thrifting. To craft the perfectly dark and well-accessorized outfit, Goths mix and match fabrics and jewelry, most of which are thrifted. They try not to support big businesses that practice fast fashion and enjoy finding clothing that speaks to them.

In “Goth: Undead Subculture,” the editors emphasize that Goth is mostly about aesthetics. “The Goth costume and subculture is aesthetically and not politically based” (Goodlad 139). Even though there’s a correlation between being Goth and leaning left politically, the core values of Goth aren’t necessarily political. Goth is a culture, not an ideology. Punk is more associated with politics and political messaging within music, whereas the themes

in Goth music are more like moods — sad and disappointed with life, but rarely angry. Goth fashion is “a representation of a desire to escape everyday life” (Goodlad 139). The dark clothes and makeup form the costume that becomes a Goth identity. Goths can express themselves and set themselves apart from the trends and societal constructs they don’t agree with.

One social construct that Goths are known to bend is gender. Robert Smith, known for his cross-dressing and red lipstick, inspired gender nonconformity within the subculture. The DIY and thrifting culture also contribute to the acceptance of androgenous outfits. Goths wear whatever they want, no matter what gender they’re assigned at birth. The Goth community is accepting of transgender and nonbinary people as well as all sexual orientations. In her book “Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality and Style,” Dunja Brill talks to Goths about their experiences with gender and sexuality within the subculture. Brill calls the subculture a “genderless utopia” where all sexualities and genders are explored and celebrated (Brill 185). Goths are usually people who don’t fit in with other groups and have always been outsiders, so they’re very accepting of people who don’t feel like they fit gender stereotypes or heterosexuality. Goths don’t judge others for being “weird” because they were all most likely judged for being different at some point in their lives.

Goth’s socially liberal ideals clash with the common misconception that Goths and punks are white supremacists. The subculture was created by white musicians, and the aesthetic favors pale skin. White foundation is a cosmetic staple for most Goths. Like in every group of people, there are some Goths who feel they have the power to say who can and can’t be Goth. On social media platforms like Reddit, these Goths argue with people over the rules of being Goth, and some will even go as far as saying that people of color can’t be Goth. However, these white supremacists make up a small minority of the subculture, and most Goths would denounce their

racist views. In fact, there is a large population of non-white Goths, and many of them are looking for ways to make the subculture more inclusive.

Due to Goths' mysterious nature, they're often targets for rumors. People feel threatened by things they don't understand. The most infamous incident of blaming Goths was after the Columbine shooting in 1999. The two high school student shooters were outcasts who wore black clothing and hid their guns inside their trench coats. While Goths everywhere argued that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold weren't Goth and didn't represent the subculture, the Goth image was tainted in the public eye. One of my sources, Michele George, who was Goth in the '80s, said even popular kids were wearing long coats until "it became a way to hide things, so people kind of quit." The style was almost "militant," she said, but the Goths didn't mean to be scary in that way. Goths are attracted to death and are in tune with their own mortality, but they are not attracted to murder and violence. Still, people are wary of those who paint their nails black and wear ominous clothing because their mysterious look is unsettling.

Since Columbine, Goths have existed mostly under the radar. Major cities in the U.S. and the U.K. are home to nightclubs that host Goth nights, and small populations live in towns across the country. The fashion itself has evolved into different substyles. The traditional Goth style is all about black trench coats and fishnets; romantic Goth features black corsets and long lacy skirts; cybergoth incorporates neon colors with the black form-fitting clothes and platform boots; Victorian Goth consists of black gowns and elegant headpieces. But the most common everyday look for a modern Goth is just black casual clothing: band T-shirts and black pants, maybe some piercings or eyeliner. Most Goths get "Gothed up" to go out to nightclubs or social events. If they're not always recognizable in public, how do Goths find each other? Online messaging platforms like Reddit and Discord have become hubs for people within the subculture to virtually

meet like-minded individuals and share their experiences as Goths. All it takes is posting a message about meeting fellow bats in the area, and social clubs and friend groups are created. That's exactly how it happened at Penn State where our story takes place.

Methodology

To capture the essence of Goth, I knew I needed to do something drastic. I traded my white Vans for black boots, athletic leggings for fishnets and my oversized sweatshirt for a flowy black dress. I quite literally stepped into the shoes of a Goth student at Penn State. I wore black makeup and accessorized with a black trench coat, layered chain necklaces and a coffin-shaped ring. I knew I would never understand what it's like to be Goth in a sea of "normal" people without trying it myself. I interviewed Goths where I am in State College, Pennsylvania, and took a walk in their chunky black boots. To pull this off, I needed a friend or two and some expert advice.

In March 2023, I found Felix Araujo through a post he made on Reddit, an online community based on posting questions and information within niche subjects. He was asking in the Penn State community if there were any Goths. I made an account and reached out, explaining that I was a journalist interested in learning more about Goth culture. We met a few weeks later, on Penn State's campus. He arrived in his black trench coat and black platform boots, that I now know are Demonica boots, and we spent an hour talking about his subculture. Felix hadn't made any Goth friends on campus at that point, and he was excited to share his passion for the music and style.

When I picked up the work in August, I reached out to Felix about letting me shadow him while he did makeup and went thrifting. He was thrilled but even more excited to tell me he was starting a Goth club at Penn State. When that took off at the beginning of September, Felix introduced me to all of the characters in this story. I had found a passionate group of Goths willing to talk about all the things they love about darkness. For the next six months, I interviewed seven sources, attended six Goth Club meetings, went to two club social events outside of the regular meetings, participated in two photoshoots and experienced two Goth house shows.

With the blessing of my thesis advisers, what follows takes the form of a magazine-style work of journalism. This story, though told through my lens as an observer and participant in Goth activities, is not about me. This is a story about a 40-year-old subculture that has evolved yet remained true to its macabre roots. This is about the members of the Goth Club at Penn State and their commitment to embracing their identities and incorporating the dark aesthetic in their daily lives in cheery Happy Valley. Through interviews, house shows and club meetings, I set out to understand the misunderstood, and conform to a group that preaches nonconformity. This is what I learned about what it takes to be Goth.



Figure 1. Goth Club at Old Main

Dramatis Personae

Felix Araujo (he/him): Felix majors in security risk analysis as a sophomore and is from Hillsdale, New Jersey. He's the founder of the Goth Club at Penn State but now serves as its Technomancer (social media manager). Felix has identified with the Goth subculture since high school and says it's the dominant part of his identity, but he just might also love Nicki Minaj.

Jaden Jones (she/they): Jaden is a forensic science major, concentrating in biology as a junior, who hails from Long Island, New York. She's the Goth Club's High Executioner (vice president)

and started diving into the depths of Goth Reddit over the summer. Jaden is a Resident Assistant and lives with her cat Morticia, whose hobbies include eating plastic, dumping water and having the zoomies.

Ayden Mateo Herold (he/him): Ayden is a senior majoring in digital and print journalism, and is from Narberth, Pennsylvania. He's now the Master of Bats and Shadows (president) of the Goth Club, but he's only explored his Goth identity within the past year or so. Ayden likes to ask me how I've been... if I've been adetto. (ba dum tss).

Anna George (she/her): Anna majors in psychology and minors in human development and family studies as a junior, and is from Uniontown, Pennsylvania. She is the Goth Club's Head Scribe (secretary) and is a second-generation Goth who started her alt journey in her emo phase in middle school. Anna is the certified proud mom of the group, carrying the bags for photoshoots and taking videos of her friends' first gig as Vox Inferni.

Phoenix Jenkins (she/her): Phoenix, as a freshman, majors in art with interests in drawing and painting, and she's originally from Sioux City, Iowa. She was the Goth Club's Minister of Propaganda (graphic designer) and identifies as punk but is also into Goth. One of her signature statement pieces is a pair of Union Jack-patterned boots.

Milo Flanagan (he/they): Milo is a freshman majoring in biobehavioral health and visual arts and is looking to minor in health policy and administration, and rehabilitation and human services.

He's a townie from State College, Pennsylvania, and he's the Bone Collector (treasurer) of the

Goth Club. His interest in punk and Goth was sparked by his father who was an “OG Goth.” His mom, who married the OG Goth, doesn’t think The Cure is Goth.

Michele George (she/her): Michele is 55 years old, works as a nutrition education adviser and grew up in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. She identified as Goth in the ‘80s as a teenager and retains influences of the subculture in her adult life. She’s the mother of Anna George and says she hates Taylor Swift with a “red-hot passion.”

Chapter 2

Meet the Goth Club

It was three days before Halloween and the third night of a college student's "Halloween weekend." Five students wearing an assortment of black boots, skirts, trench coats, fishnets, layers of jewelry, white faces, and haunting black eyes and lips stood in line to take pictures at the Nittany Lion Shrine—a photo hotspot for Penn State families. The ghoulish group looked dead at the camera and posed with their fingers pointing to the sky like devil horns. Upon their descent from the shrine's steps, a man and woman wearing Penn State gear noticed the uniformed clan.

"Wow, you guys have great costumes!" the woman said.

The one wearing the long black trench coat, his short hair teased in a wild hive, snickered. "Thank you."

"Are you going as Kiss?" the man asked, hoping that one of them would stick their tongue out like Gene Simmons.

"We're the Goth Club," the student replied nonchalantly.

The man and woman said "oh" in unison, smiling and sharing glances as the Goths strutted down the street.

In my oversized Penn State jacket and sweatpants, I followed. The Goths took me under their bat wings to help me understand what makes them unique, what makes them identify with darkness every day of the year and not just during Halloween.

The Goth Club at Penn State had made its first big public outing that night in the clothing and makeup that make them feel like themselves. The founder of the club, Felix Araujo, excitedly encouraged his friends to make TikToks with Goth sounds before they embarked on

the rest of their night out. They rode into the night not to scare, not to cause chaos, but to eat dinner at Olive Garden. They did what so many Penn State students were doing on that Saturday night, but with a dark twist.

When I met Felix, he was a freshman looking for friends, like any new student on a large college campus. Felix agreed to meet me by the Starbucks inside Penn State's student union. I was worried it would be hard to identify him in the crowd, but the iconic black trench coat and bold eyeliner made him look like he belonged in a vampire-slayer movie, and I knew I was about to meet someone who would change my understanding of Goth.

Felix grew up in Hillsdale, New Jersey, in a Hispanic Catholic household. While he loved the music associated with Goth, it wasn't until he left for college that he felt comfortable experimenting with the fashion of the subculture. When he first tried applying black lipstick and heavy eyeliner, Felix said his father didn't approve and thought he looked "scary."

"We're not scary. We're not spooky," Araujo said on that afternoon in March 2023. "We just happen to dress a different way."

Felix was already proud of his subculture, but he admitted that it was hard to make friends who didn't identify with it. He felt that people were deterred from interacting with him because he looked like a "movie villain."

Despite not yet having a community on campus, Felix didn't let that stop him from dressing in a way that made him feel like himself.

"Since I started dressing more Gothic, it's really (been) helpful for my own self-confidence and expression," Felix said.

At that time, he hadn't met anyone with similar tastes in music and fashion, so even though he was feeling comfortable in his own skin, he was starting to doubt that he would find a group of people to enjoy the subculture with.

"It's difficult to start a club here that's dedicated to (Goth) culture because just not a lot of people are interested in it," Felix said. "Unfortunately, I hate to say it, but Goth is a dying subculture."

Apparently, a lot can change in a few months.

"If you told freshman me at this time last year, 'Oh, you would be in a club with 20 other people having house parties and dancing to Goth music and getting all Gothed up and not feeling scared or ashamed or embarrassed,' I wouldn't believe you," Felix said smiling in almost the same spot we met about eight months earlier.

All it took was one response from a Penn State student on Reddit. Jaden Jones, a now-junior forensic science major, suggested that Felix start a Goth club. Now, the Goths have a lively Discord server, an online messaging application that allows for a variety of channels for discussion within the club, that currently has over 55 members. They also have almost 400 followers on Instagram. They host informational meetings, makeup tutorials, group meals and even a bake sale, like many clubs at Penn State do. The self-proclaimed nonconformists conform to traditional club activities, not because they don't truly believe in nonconformity, but because everyone craves a sense of belonging in their own way.

Phoenix Jenkins, the former "Minister of Propaganda" or club graphic designer, was happy to join a group of likeminded individuals as a freshman.

"It's just a safe space to talk to people about (Goth culture). That's what it is. Community is there," Phoenix said. "I think it's made for people who have been rejected."

Phoenix grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, listening to punk tunes in the back of her father's tattoo parlor. Her parents started taking her to punk concerts when she was around the age of 10, and her love of horror movies began when her family moved to Pittsburgh when she was 14. She would sell her artwork at horror conventions in the city and started watching horror movies, one of her favorites being "The Return of the Living Dead"—it features a punk song by The Cramps. She eventually fell in love with the movies and the horror-inspired artworks, and from there, her involvement in the Goth subculture "snowballed."

While Phoenix's favorite bands and her alt origins lie with punk because that's what she grew up on, she dove into Goth music and style after getting into horror films. She likes to wear all black and jackets that she's personalized with pins and patches. We met at Noodles & Company, and we sat in the almost-empty restaurant talking about her perception of the Goth culture at Penn State. She was wearing a Metallica T-shirt and told me that we could go thrifting together before my first Goth party.

As a freshman art major, Phoenix joined the Goth Club within the first few months of being at Penn State, and from her perspective, the club has brought out a large community of Goths—more than she was expecting. She said she loves seeing Goths in full makeup and black garb at popular places on campus like Starbucks.

"There's a pride here, too," Phoenix said. "Not only is there pride for the school, I think people even have pride in themselves here sometimes."

Anna George, the Head Scribe of the Goth Club at Penn State, went out in public with Goth makeup for the first time on Oct. 28, 2023, with the executive board of the club. For her, it was a "liberating" experience that she couldn't have done by herself.

"I can't really explain to you how happy and good I felt in that moment," Anna said.

Jaden Jones, the club’s vice president “High Executioner,” came to University Park from Penn State Abington, and she, too, found a welcoming community of Goths upon arrival. As we drank boba tea at the window seats of Teadori in downtown State College, Jaden detailed what she’s learned about the Goth subculture since diving into it over the summer. When the shop’s dog came over to sniff us, she said she hoped her cat Morticia wouldn’t smell it and get jealous.



Figure 2. Morticia models on her perch

In the basements, garages and living rooms of local house show venues with small makeshift stages, multicolored lights and blasting speakers, Jaden has “never felt more at home.”

Like Phoenix, Jaden grew up liking alternative and punk music, but she wanted to explore the Goth subculture because she liked the music and aesthetics. On Reddit, she described

how some Goths would harshly dictate who could and couldn't be Goth, and most gatekeepers are sticklers with the music-based subculture, denying that it is also based on fashion.

“I like to joke and say it's the conforming to the nonconformative,” Jaden said.

But in person, Jaden has found that the community of Goths is very welcoming and easy to talk to because their definition of “normal” is more accepting.

“I feel like I have so many, like, intersectional personalities that my definition of normal is probably screwed all the way up,” Jaden said. “So, Black, first-generation American, gay, neurodivergent, so it's like all of them just kind of stack up on each other, not normal, not normal, not normal, not normal, not normal.”

In the Goth and punk spaces, Jaden said what truly makes them not normal is the mindset of being radically supportive of others who also don't fit society's standard for normal.

When the Goth Club ventures out to restaurants in full Goth attire and makeup, Milo Flanagan said it's “funny to see Goth people doing regular things” because it “challenges people's views on what's right and what's normal.”

Milo is a freshman at Penn State who grew up in State College, and he'll go out in public dressed in his DIY outfits, layered chains and black makeup just to challenge the norms and make people ask why they should care about someone else's style just because it's different.

Ayden Herold, who's now the Goth Club's president, told me he felt like he never really fit in anywhere. And after trying his best to fit a certain mold, eventually he just figured, “why bother?”

“I spent a lot of high school trying to fit in and be like normal or whatever, and that kind of led to me being a rather forgettable person,” Ayden said, “so, in college, I was all about just trying to embrace more of who I was and what I liked, and (Goth Club) was part of that.”

Ayden considers himself “diet Goth” because on an average day, no one would ever guess he’s the Master of Bats and Shadows. He doesn’t always dress up in Goth clothing, but he does like black jeans and T-shirts, maybe some jewelry. His interest in Goth was inspired by his love for horror movies, “Frankenstein” by Mary Shelley and the subgenre of Goth music called darkwave. Despite being relatively new to the subculture, Ayden said he feels accepted in the community because that’s a part of its core values.

“We’re intolerant of intolerance,” Ayden said.



Figure 3. Ayden Herold contemplates at Pasquerilla Spiritual Center

DIY Values

Felix made a rectangle with his arms to illustrate the Goodwill on Benner Pike and drew out the route he takes to maximize his shopping success. First, he looks through the shoes, then dives into the racks of tops. Besides gravitating toward black and other dark colors, he touches each piece of fabric, because if something feels good, it's worth looking into. Then Felix looks at the pants, skirts and jackets on the back wall. He said his best find was the oft-mentioned black trench coat that he found for \$9.

It was the morning of my first Goth transformation and my first State College house show. Not ready to put on my black dress yet, I met Felix at the bus stop in my typical gray leggings and a blue "Knoebels" sweatshirt that you can catch me wearing at least once a week. It was too early for Felix to be Gothed up as well, but his strong subculture roots were still visible. He wore a black T-shirt, black-and-gray checkered sweatpants, a leather jacket and my personal favorite, black Crocs. I'm a fan of the sweats and Crocs combo, and I was pleased to see that Felix's dedication to the dark stayed true even in his loungewear.

We walked into Goodwill on a Sunday when tagged items were 50% off, and it felt like we were shopping with every townie in State College. Felix said it's easy to get overwhelmed in a busy store, but that's why his methodical approach to thrifting is crucial. We headed straight for the shelves of shoes, but the selection was slim, and neither of us tried anything on. I walked behind Felix as he expertly shuffled through the packed racks of tops. He laid a finger on each piece of fabric for a second until he found a texture that felt right to him. And if it was black, he stopped to examine it further.

Felix didn't buy anything that morning, but he wasn't stressed because he likes to thrift every week when he has a break from classes. Thrifting and repurposing clothes to make something new isn't just Felix's hobby; it's one of the core characteristics of the subculture.

Phoenix is a huge fan of pins and DIY-ing her own jackets. For her, it's all about making a statement and outwardly projecting music interests.

"The whole thing is about expressing yourself," Phoenix said. "And the DIY fashion is the best way to do that because you're making something yourself to be yourself."

Jaden said thrifting is a way for Goths to show their anti-consumerism and flaunt their nonconformity, but for some, making their own clothes is what makes them feel more comfortable in their own skin.

Felix is a transgender man who appreciates the way that DIY Goth styles break down gender stereotypes. He identified his style as masculine traditional Goth but also noted that he likes to incorporate long black skirts into his wardrobe.

"Goth means accessibility," Felix said. "It shouldn't just be restrained to, 'Oh, you have to get things secondhand and say no to capitalism and blah blah blah.' It doesn't always have to be true."

With his collection of jackets, chunky boots, pants, skirts and a variety of jewelry including silver chains, crucifixes and skulls, Felix has found that Goth fashion "gets rid of the idea of masculine and feminine."



Figure 4. Infernal Council at the Lion Shrine

Beauty of the Macabre

At one point, I had to ask the question, “Why do you like looking like you’re dead?”

After an hour and a half of painting his caramel skin white, carving sharp cheekbones with black contour and applying black lipstick, Felix sat in the Penn State library teaching others how to achieve the same dark look. Jaden made a slide presentation that dove into the history and significance of Goth makeup. The makeup looks were largely inspired by Siouxsie Sioux and other Goth musicians. The goal for them was to look pale and dead, with dark eyes and sharp, sunken cheekbones.

Anna said while some people just like the aesthetic if they grew up loving horror, she thinks about it as another way to defy societal standards.

Anna explained that in Western culture, death isn't celebrated or accepted in any way. People grow up fearing death, so embracing it is a way for Goths to stand out and challenge societal norms.

Jaden has always been drawn to death, which eventually led to her becoming a forensic science major in college. She eventually wants to be a medical examiner.

But one day as I watched her put on traditional makeup, she admitted that while the idea of working with dead strangers doesn't faze her, she hasn't come to terms with her own mortality or that of her loved ones.

She said she's considered keeping a journal to help her explore her thoughts and beliefs about death before she starts a career as a medical examiner. But since the acceptance of death is a core value of the subculture, Jaden shares in appreciating the darker side of life as opposed to wearing "rose-colored glasses."

"Because we signed the contract of being alive means that one day, we're all going to kick it, and bad things happen throughout life," Jaden said. "Rather than shy away from all of the darkness and everything that could happen to you, embrace it because it's not going to go away."

Ayden said he didn't start to think about death as beautiful until he moved from sunny Florida to Pennsylvania. Watching the leaves change color and eventually fall off the trees to reveal the skeletal structures underneath just to rebloom in the spring spoke to Ayden in a metaphorical way. He called this "beautiful transition" an example of how death is a necessary part of life that makes living all that more special.

“It's the shifting of things and the beauty in that not everything can be the same way forever,” Ayden said. “Not everything is in the same state forever because if that's the case, then it loses what you love about it.”



Figure 5. Jaden Jones applies lipstick

Realities of Acceptance

While the Goths in Happy Valley have found where they belong and feel sure of their lifestyle choices, not everyone in their lives is so supportive. They receive backlash from family members who don't understand why they want to look like corpses. Parents worry about how the

professional world will perceive their children and if Goth is as scary as it looks. And even with explanations from the Goths, many people struggle to grasp why anyone would choose to belong to a dark subculture. It takes confidence and sureness to reject societal norms and parental expectations to become Goth, but the Goth Club members do it anyway because it's who they are.

Felix grew up in a Hispanic Catholic household, which ultimately helped push him in the Goth direction. But his rebellion didn't come without pushback.

Felix's father didn't think Hispanics could be Goth.

The white faces and anti-Catholic symbolism in the subculture made his father feel like he didn't belong there, but Felix feels otherwise — even when he feels out of place at Hispanic events at Penn State.

“I feel a little ostracized because, yeah, I don't dress like you guys, but I'm still Hispanic like you guys,” Felix said. “I'm not trying to be white.”

Jaden had a similar experience in that the Black students at her high school would call her an “Oreo” for listening to Twenty-One Pilots and other white bands. But her parents, both immigrants from Jamaica, have accepted her punk and Goth identities. She even said she was surprised, but her mom grew up listening to Nirvana and Queen when she came to America.

Like Felix, Ayden has been battling the perfect image that his parents have of him since he started to delve into his Goth interests in college.

As he put it, his parents “aren't into it.”

In his sophomore year, Ayden dyed his hair blue after his parents dropped him off at school. In a rush before they visited him for Parents' Weekend, he had to dye his hair brown again.

He has also dressed as Lady Dimitrescu from the survival horror game “Resident Evil Village” for Halloween and now paints his nails black and practices his eyeliner and black lipstick for Goth makeup looks.

“I don't think I told them I cross-dressed just yet,” Ayden said. “That'll be a story for another time.”



Figure 6. Ayden Herold gets bloody

Long Live Goth

Goths and non-Goths of all different backgrounds have probably heard this phrase at least once in their lives: “It’s just a phase.”

For me, it wasn't my love of emo music (that, Mom, is not a phase.) My phase was musical theatre. And I still cringe thinking about how briefly yet passionately I loved "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Wicked." I can still appreciate these acclaimed shows, but my interest in them bordered obsession. I never was a "theatre kid." I didn't religiously attend musicals; I didn't participate in any musicals myself. But for some reason, I was obsessed with the soundtracks in fifth and sixth grade and, of course, annoyed all of my non-musical-loving friends by requesting eight-minute overtures rather than One Direction on long car rides. By the end of middle school, I had grown out of the musical theatre phase and returned to my punk-pop roots. I never took the next step and let my music taste seep into my fashion choices, nor did I embody the personality traits and behavioral characteristics of emos at the time. Throughout this process, I've asked myself why. Why didn't I make the commitment that the Goths did when they started listening to Goth bands? Why didn't my music taste lure me into a subculture?

I don't know if I'll ever have a definite answer, but I think it's because I had a community, a small but tightknit group of friends throughout my childhood, that didn't like the same music. I was always the odd one out, but I didn't feel the need to break away to find like-minded individuals because these people were my family. I attended a small Catholic school from kindergarten to eighth grade. Like many Goths, the immersion into Catholic school made me want to defy its rules even more. However, in that school where my entire grade consisted of 30 kids, I had found my forever best friends. I felt like I belonged with them, and I still do. I never felt the need to express myself differently than my best friends because I could be myself around them regardless of my different music taste.

The Goths I've met all have different reasons for joining the subculture, but for most, the sense of community that comes with interacting with like-minded individuals is the driving

force. For them, Goth isn't a phase. It isn't just an experiment in self-expression. It's a community and a mindset that they embody because it's where they feel accepted. But if Goth isn't a phase, then where does that leave the Goths who started their journey into the darkness in the '80s? As middle-aged adults, do they still feel that Goth isn't a phase?

Michele George started expressing her Goth interests in her junior and senior years of high school in 1985 and 1986, and now her daughter Anna George is the Head Scribe (treasurer) of the Goth Club at Penn State.

Growing up, Michele said she listened to a variety of bands ranging from the Sex Pistols to The Cult to The Cure. When she graduated from high school at 18, she moved to California and followed metal bands like Mötley Crüe and went to many smaller concerts within the scene.

Her style started to change after she got a haircut that set her apart from her sisters, and she found that she loved being different. Cindy Lauper was popular at the time and had shaved the side of her head, so that's exactly what Michele's hairdresser did to her. From there, Michele leaned into black clothing and eyeliner, and one of her favorite pieces was a black oversized men's tailored coat.

Her inspiration was the music and her affinity for dark things, but what really drew Michele to the subculture was the fact that it was a counterculture.

Michele grew up in a strict Catholic household in rural Fayette County, Pennsylvania, was the third child, and felt like she was never the perfect daughter compared to her sisters. Wearing dark clothes and makeup and shaving her head was her way of rebelling against her parents who expected her to look like a proper young woman.

“Who wants to be one of a million other people?” Michele said. “Everybody wants to express themselves, and it might be in their looks.”

When her daughter Anna started dying her hair and expressing her love for Goth things, Michele embraced it and encouraged her to be herself.

In middle school, Anna said she leaned more into the emo subculture then explored the punk subculture in high school. She wore band tees, rubber bracelets, dyed her hair and eventually got a nose ring. She said her parents were supportive of everything as long as she wasn't “being a delinquent and doing things to harm (herself).”

While Michele became Goth to rebel against the way she was raised, Anna didn't need to. Anna said her affinity for dark things stemmed from the sadness she feels about the state of the world. She also started to question her Catholic upbringing, which led her to love the Gothic spin on traditionally Catholic symbols like crosses.

Since embracing the Goth subculture and finding like-minded people at Penn State, Anna said she feels like she has found a welcoming group of friends that will last forever.

“I have never felt more comfortable in my own skin in my entire life,” Anna said.

Since her tastes haven't been changing as much as they did when she was younger, Anna said she feels like the Goth subculture will stick with her in different ways as she ages.

“I'm going to be the parent 15 years from now being like, ‘Oh, come on, kids, time to clean the house while we listen to Robert Smith,’” Anna said.

For Michele, being Goth in high school was a way to rebel against her parents and explore self-expression. Now 55 years old with a husband and daughter, she said she doesn't “need” Goth like she did when she was younger. The cynical mindset and inclination to wear

dark clothing is still very much a part of who she is, but she knows who she is, and she doesn't need to lean on a subculture for her identity.

While she's grown out her black hair and has been dressing professionally for several years, Michele still wears mostly black clothing and eyeliner, and she still enjoys listening to the music. On our Zoom call, she wore a dark shirt with a modest amount of eyeliner, paired with the iconic Penn State blue background.

"I've always been cynical," Michele said. "I was always told that it was because I was Gen X, but maybe it was because I'm just a Goth at heart."

Chapter 3

My Transformation

Before going to my first Goth party, I needed to add a little darkness to my wardrobe. Phoenix took me to Webster's Bookstore and Café in downtown State College where I picked out a thrifted black dress that reminded me of something Wednesday Addams would wear. Then we went to other stores searching for accessories, and I picked up a black hairclip and a pair of fishnet stockings. The next day, I bought black lipstick, and knowing that Felix would have enough makeup to share with me, I had completed my shopping.

Thrifting and purchasing black clothing and accessories didn't feel much different than shopping for the clothes I normally wear. Maybe it was because Halloween was approaching or because we were shopping in stores that attract unique crowds, but no one batted an eye while ringing up my items, and I thought to myself that this transformation would be a piece of cake. But buying and wearing my new clothes turned out to be entirely different beasts.

I put on the fishnets and black long-sleeve dress. I instantly wanted to take it off. I admittedly am not a huge fan of dresses, and I had never worn fishnets. The only part of my outfit that I had owned beforehand was my pair of plain black boots. I didn't feel like myself, and I felt my confidence plummet. The idea of running into someone on the elevator and standing next to people on the bus was making me sweat. I had expected weird looks, but I wasn't ready for them. I was all alone, dressed in Gothic attire, on a random Sunday afternoon. I told myself I didn't want to go. But Felix was waiting for me in North campus so he could finalize my look with accessories and makeup.

I made it out of my apartment building without running into anyone and didn't make eye contact with the three people waiting for the bus. I felt and saw the looks I got when I sat in the

back of the bus, and it was uncomfortable. But I hurried to Felix's dorm so I wouldn't be alone in my style. I felt relieved when he appeared at the door.

In Felix's room, about two hours before the Goth night was set to start, he sat me in front of his wide array of makeup products on his desk ranging from dark eyeshadow palettes to white foundations. I told him he could just have fun and do anything he liked to make me look Goth, and he was happy to do so. I'm not into doing my own makeup, so just the feeling of the cold brushes on my eyelids was foreign to me. Knowing that it was all black was even further from what I was used to.

I opened my eyes. Two black clouds with defined eyeliner wings stared back at me. Felix didn't paint my face white, but I had never felt paler. My black lips were the most shocking feature. My lips felt small, my teeth extra white. I felt scary. But when I looked back up to my eyes, I found myself liking the way the eyeshadow made my blue eyes pop. I felt pretty. I could see how the dramatic eye makeup was desirable for Goths.

Felix loaned me a silver chain to wrap around my neck, a coffin-shaped ring and one of his favorite clothing items: his black trench coat with personalized band pins. With the makeup and added accessories, I felt like an entirely different person. Besides my recognizable curly hair, everything about me had transformed. It felt similar to the way a Halloween costume feels, but knowing that people choose to dress up Goth to go out on a regular basis made it feel more like an identity crisis. I had stepped into an entirely different body, and I didn't know how I felt about it. It was cool to see myself differently, but I also felt like a fraud. I felt like I didn't embody the Goth spirit, and my awkwardness in the clothing gave that away. But it was time to put my transformation to the test and leave the safety of Felix's dorm. It was time to let the rest of the world see my new look.



Figure 7. My debut Goth outfit



Figure 8. A close-up of my Goth makeup

We walked into the Starbucks located in the library, and the first thing I noticed were the pauses in conversation followed by hushed words and the not-so-successful attempts not to stare. I felt the heat rising to my cheeks, coloring them pink—ruining the pale, deadly look I was wearing. In that moment, I wanted to wipe the layers of black eyeliner, eyeshadow and lipstick off my face and tell everyone it’s just a costume. It wasn’t Halloween yet.

I watched the employee at the register turn to her coworkers with her eyes wide and imagined she said something to the effect of “Guys, do I have to be on register for these two?” But when we ordered our drinks, she was polite and didn’t say a word about our appearances. It was everything I could tell was unsaid that was starting to get to me. I wanted to know what

people thought. I could tell they were silently judging us, and it was killing me not to know what was going on in their minds.

It wasn't until we got our drinks and sat in a quiet area of the library that Felix told me he wouldn't have gone out in public all Gothed up without me. Even though Felix feels the most comfortable as a Goth, he still has reservations about looking Goth in public. The stares and whispers get to him too. But that's why starting the Goth Club at Penn State has played a pivotal role in building his self-confidence as a Goth. Realizing that my presence made him feel more comfortable expressing himself made me feel like what I was doing was important for this group of people who are judged. I was fascinated by a subculture that is rooted in tradition but still accepting of people who are cast out of "normal society." I hadn't thought that I might play a role in encouraging Goths at Penn State to embrace themselves. I was suddenly happy to be there and less aware of my own discomfort.

We then walked to the bus stop where we met Phoenix before heading to the show. More people gave us weird looks, but then two students stopped to tell us how cool we looked. We talked for five minutes about the style, the club and other commonalities. I found out the one individual was from Delaware, which is where I'm from. I wasn't expecting many people to respond to our outfits positively or enthusiastically, so the fact that the conversation led to complete strangers finding common ground was interesting to me. No one else waiting for their bus was socializing, but the group with the most off-putting looks garnered the most interaction.

The longer I spent in the fishnets and black trench coat, the more I warmed up to them. I saw that not all people thought I looked weird. I understood why it was easier for Felix to get Gothed up with me and why everyone I had talked to was thankful to have the club. Even the

Goths, who preach nonconformity and choose to be different from the rest of society, feel the need to belong to a group.

None of us had been to the venue of the house show before, but as we approached the dark house with lights coming from only the basement, we knew we were in the right spot. Felix, Phoenix and I walked up to the garage of a house with overgrown grass. A woman wrapped in a blanket held out her hand for cash: \$5 for Goths, \$8 for anyone else. We paid and entered an empty basement with one small stage in the back. A drum set, speakers and microphones stood on the stage. The concrete walls were cold, and the house was silent. Upstairs, two people sat in a living room. Two couches and one lounge chair lined the room.



Figure 9. Goths on a couch

A man with hair like Einstein and thick eyeliner offered us his bong. The Goths were quiet, silently smoking, and occasionally complimenting each other's fashion choices and makeup. Jaden and Ayden joined the group a bit later, and we all waited for the first band to play.

Dandelioness, a singer-songwriter from New Mexico, was the first to take the small stage. About 15 people showed up to see her perform a melancholy setlist. She hummed and wailed like a melodic siren, putting the crowd in a trance. The Goths swayed from side to side. Dandelioness howled, and the crowd howled back. She was the most Goth-sounding performer of the night.

The next band, Fez, unleashed the punks at the show. Their sound was full of electric guitar and quick drums. I had never wanted earplugs so badly. Fez rocked our faces off. The Goths nodded their heads to the beat and side-stepped with more energy. The punks, a group not dressed as darkly and not as somber, started slamming into each other and pushing each other in a circle. The Goths in their long coats and dresses glided to safety along the wall and watched as the punks chose violence for entertainment. Everyone held their palms out in case someone fell into them. The band's more upbeat songs caused the most chaos, and when the songs came to an end, the punks went back to observing and dancing like nothing violent had just occurred.



Figure 10. Moshers moshing

“How was baby’s first mosh?” Jaden asked me as we climbed a narrow staircase back up to the living room.

I told her I had seen a mosh pit at the My Chemical Romance concert I attended last September, but that was so un-Goth of me to say. I almost felt embarrassed to admit that I like punk-pop and emo music. Jaden just chuckled and joined the rest of the group back on the couches, reminding me that I was with a very accepting group of ominous-looking people. But I also knew where the lines lay between the various alternative subcultures, and while they get along, they don’t like to be mistaken for one another.

Goths, punks, emos and other subsets of these groups have their own defining characteristics, and they usually like to keep it that way.

“Punk is music, yes, music first, but it’s also the politics and the mindset, really,” Jaden said.

Jaden said punks are angrier when it comes to politics, and they're more likely to include political messaging in their music. The music also features a more "chaotic" rock sound with heavy drums and electric guitar. To her, Goth has values of anti-consumerism, but politics aren't at its core, and it's mostly about the melancholy music.

At one of the Goth Club's meetings on the history of the subculture, Felix turned to TV's animated series "South Park" for its explanation of the difference between Goth and emo. In the clip of the episode, Goths are described as people who hate the world for being a messed-up place, and emos supposedly hate themselves.

The way Milo put it, emo music tends to thematically convey that "everything sucks" and that everyone is miserable, and Goth music may be sad, but as a Goth "you're examining sadness as a concept."

The way the club talked about emos was funny because they're inclusive, but they all admitted that being called emo is considered an insult. I tried to keep quiet about the My Chemical Romance concert I went to (it was awesome). But I got the sense that Goth is almost the classiest of the dark subcultures, and everything else was maybe not. I listened to some Goth music and tried to get into it, but I love more upbeat songs, and I still found myself looking for the pop beats within my favorite punk-pop and emo bands from the 2000s.

Chapter 4

Breaking Down the Subculture

Based on Paul Hodkinson's four characteristics of a subculture, Goth fits the bill. It is its own culture and has been since 1980, and based on the interest the Goth Club garnered at Penn State, it's not going anywhere despite the cobwebs.



Figure 11. Ayden Herold displays his DIY tattoos

Consistent Distinctiveness

As Jaden explained during a Goth Club meeting, there are subcultures of fashion within this subculture of music. Goth is layered much like the chains and fabric that its followers wear.

But from cyber-Goth to traditional Goth, the key element of the style is always the color black. Whether you're a corset-loving Goth or a free-flowing, long skirts and jackets Goth, chances are you'd still be identified as Goth.

One thing I noticed while following the Goth Club around is that each person has a unique style. Felix's black trench coat is basically its own character at this point, and Jaden's black Mary Janes paired with frilly white socks are a softer yet still very Goth look. Phoenix and her artsy DIY jackets with patches and pins galore showed me how she incorporates Goth into her punk outfits.

When Goths go out, they go out. All out. Leather, heavy makeup, chains, rings, chokers, fake blood. There's no mistaking them for any other group but Goth (unless you're a middle-aged Kiss fan). I have run into Felix and other members of the club in between classes, and even if they're not fully Gothed up, they still incorporate their style into their appearance.

Not all Goths wear the exact same style, with some leaning toward masculine or feminine clothing looks, but they're consistent with always dressing differently than the rest of the students on Penn State's campus.

"I do think fashion is a big value of (Goth)," Milo said, "just looking visually different from everyone else and kind of being (able to) identify each other that way, but then also to challenge people's views on what's right and what's normal."

And even though Felix and Milo told me they like my oversized Penn State winter jacket, they wouldn't be caught dead wearing it.



Figure 12. Goth Club poses at the Lion Shrine

Identity

For the members of the Goth Club at Penn State, Goth isn't just a hobby or a phase; it's a part of their identity. They all joined the club to meet people with similar interests, people who understand what it's like to belong to a subculture.

As part of their identities, some club members clarified how much Goth plays a part in their life. For instance, Felix, the founder of the Goths, said the subculture makes up 75-80% of his identity.

A lot of Felix's interests, personality traits and hobbies stem from the Goth subculture. Ayden said Goth is about 25% of his identity. Anna, whose Gothic roots span generations, said her identity is 30-40% Goth. All three of these individuals have dedicated their time and energy to being on the executive board of the club, yet they acknowledged that Goth is not 100% of who they are. So, who else are they?

The simple answer is: They're college students.

They study journalism, security risk analysis, forensic science, psychology, biobehavioral health and art.

Milo Flanagan, who wants to eventually work in public health programs and social services, said his goal is to provide health care clinics for those who can't afford insurance so that he can "work with people but then also have the qualifications to work with policy because you can help as many individual people as you physically can."

Milo is passionate about what he's studying and what he wants his career to be, but he leaves room in his life for Goth activities and special hobbies, which he said tend to lean into the subculture.

Milo loves taxidermy.

He has collected a bunch of bones, a pig skull and a deer skull. With students sitting around us at the HUB-Robeson Center studying and doing work, Milo and I talked about the taxidermy process and its ethics, from death to molding carcasses. He didn't hold anything back. Milo is passionate about oddities and even put a slide presentation together for one of the Goth Club's meetings.

"I think it's all fascinating," Milo said. "And like mortuary stuff too, it's so much like science but art at the same time."

Milo shares the Goth belief that death is fascinating and beautiful, and he said his identity based on the music roots of the subculture is 30% Goth and 70% punk, though his hobbies lean more toward Goth.



Figure 13. Bones

Commitment

To be a part of a subculture, the members have to be committed. The Goth Club at Penn State proves its loyalty to the subculture by holding weekly meetings and incorporating dark themes into anything they can.

Instead of the boring president, vice president and secretary of a club, the Goth Club has an Infernal Council, consisting of the Master of Bats and Shadows, High Executioner, Head Scribe, Bone Collector, Technomancer and Minister of Propaganda.

For every holiday, the club puts a gothic spin on their festivities, including Goth photos with Santa and a “Bloody Valentines” party that features “until death do us part” valentine crafts and black chocolate-covered strawberries.

They go out like all college students, but instead of spending their weekends in fraternity basements, they flock to basements with makeshift stages to headbang to local punk and Goth bands. Instead of going shopping, they thrift. They have photoshoots at Penn State landmarks but make sure to stop at Atherton’s grave.

They are Goth to their core, and none of them think they’ll give up their subculture.

“I regret not embracing myself sooner,” Felix said.



Figure 14. Goth Club visits Atherton’s grave

Autonomy

Last but not least, what makes Goth a subculture is the way it has its own events, merchandise and form of communication.

As far as language goes, Goths don't really have their own vocabulary, except members of the subculture are "bats." But what makes Goths unique is how they can find each other and communicate without being from the same place.

Online social platforms, namely Reddit, give Goths an online space to chat, post pictures and ask questions about the subculture. Reddit is how Felix and Jaden met, and it's how I met Felix. Goths are a small minority of the world's population, but they unite through the internet, which has helped the decades-old subculture survive.

The Goth Club at Penn State has also inspired special Goth Night house shows and has helped attract more melancholy acts to the State College house show scene.



Figure 15. Vox Inferni plays its first set

Ayden, Felix, Jaden, Milo, Phoenix and one other friend of theirs named Emily formed a band called Vox Inferni. Their first gig was at a Goth Night at the same house that hosted my first Goth outing. On Feb. 17, I took the cotton gauze black dress out of my closet and dusted the cobwebs from my black lipstick.

This time, it was my turn to take everything I learned about Goth fashion and makeup and get myself Gothed up for the club's big night.

Last time, I felt like the makeup was more of a costume. This time, I decided against a dramatic eye because A) I didn't quite trust myself with eyeliner and B) The sunken eye look

just isn't me. Instead, I applied a heavy layer of black mascara and did my lipstick for the first time on my own, overlining my lips slightly for a fuller look. I may have rubbed it off and started over once or twice, but I finally found what looked right to me and set out for the show.



Figure 16. My second Goth look

This Goth night was packed. I couldn't even get from the living room to the basement without squeezing past Goths left and right through the kitchen. Before Vox Inferni went on, we watched local punk bands turn the crowd into spastic jumping beans and semi-moshers. Vox Inferni was the last band to perform and had a half set of melodious Goth covers to offer.

Ayden, the front man, stood facing the crowd in his skeletal Hawaiian shirt and black jeans. Throughout the night, he had people give him Sharpie tattoos up and down his arms to add

to his DIY style, then introduced his DIY band and their DIY set. (They were down two members, Phoenix and Felix.)

Vox Inferni debuted with a cover of “Lucretia My Reflection” by Sisters of Mercy, and by the time the band was through “Disorder” by Joy Division, Ayden was dancing his way off the stage, fully immersing himself in the front man role.

“This club brings out the best in people,” Anna said to me as she held out her phone to record her best friends perform their first gig.

After concluding their set, Ayden thanked everyone who listened, all of the Goth Club members, Anna who recorded the entire performance and “Courtney our journalist.”

I laughed. In many ways the club has taken me under their bat wings, and while I said I wouldn’t officially join the club through OrgCentral due to conflict of interest, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel like part of the Goths. Even in my Penn State sweatshirts and Uggs.

Then to close out the night, we did what all Goths do, sing and dance to “Bad Romance” by Lady Gaga.



Figure 17. Taking a selfie with the Goth Club

Chapter 5

Til Death Do Us Part

After not seeing my Goth acquaintances for about four weeks, I walked into the club's first meeting after winter break expecting smiles but also some oh-jeez-she's-still-here type of looks.

Ayden was about to dive into the gruesome and disturbing history of black metal band Mayhem that ranged from gory concerts to suicide and murder. I walked in, immediately greeted with genuine smiles and claps that I had come back to learn more about their subculture.

I have my group of friends, and I've made club friends throughout my years at Penn State, but never in a million years did I think that a room full of Goths would make me feel so welcome. I was the only one wearing non-black attire, sticking out like a sore thumb. A sheep amongst the wolves. Except these are the friendliest wolves you'll ever meet.

And that's what I kept thinking of, this dichotomy between Goths' exterior and interior. Here they were, all dressed in black, listening to and participating in a presentation about a band that drew blood on stage and burned churches for fun, and yet not one of them could hurt a fly.

The last slide of Ayden's presentation included takeaways, and one of them was advice to not be terrible people who exploit their friends' deaths—like they all needed the reminder. I couldn't help but laugh.

As I said my goodbyes, I let them know I would be at their next event. Then Jaden told me she loves when I show up to their activities. Very few people are comfortable with a stranger dissecting their lifestyle, but the Goths made their community a temporary home for me.

Will I ever be Goth myself? The answer is still no. I've learned that my music taste is more emo than anything, and I still can't see myself giving up my colored tops and blue jeans. But I can say I've learned that Goths aren't all that different from "normal people." They have their own styles and hobbies, but at the end of the day, they're just people trying to fit into the world by embracing not fitting in. And if you ever feel alone, the Goths will likely take you in. Even if you think The Cure is just rock. Welllll....

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