

Subcultural Blogging? Online Journals and Group Involvement among UK Goths

Paul Hodkinson

Over the past decade, several studies have illustrated the capacity of the Internet to contribute to the development or the reinforcement of music scenes and subcultures. Such studies include Sarah Thornton's identification of the role of Websites as a means of publicizing the details of raves and clubs as part of the UK "acid house" phenomenon¹ and Marion Leonard's focus upon the role of a network of Web-based "e-zines" (online fanzines) in the development of a global shared identity among Riot Grrrl fans.² Other studies have demonstrated the capacity of group discussion forums to facilitate interaction and shared identity among Phish fans³, Kate Bush enthusiasts⁴, members of the US alternative country scene⁵ and bedroom electronic music producers.⁶ While differing in their specifics, such studies all have demonstrated the capacity for individuals to develop or consolidate their involvement in particular music and style related groupings through the use of collective online resources.

My research of the Internet use of UK goths during the late 1990s demonstrated findings consistent with such studies. The goth scene has for over two decades been characterized by a strong sense of subcultural community centered upon particular 'dark' styles of music and fashion. By the late 1990s, a network of specialist Websites and group discussion fora were playing an extensive role in reinforcing the cohesion and shared identity which characterized the group.⁷ In particular, in Usenet groups and email lists, goths found ready-made group spaces which enabled daily access to subcultural information, conversation and friendships, all of which liable to intensify their subcultural participation.⁸ Importantly, these findings, as with those of other studies, largely were based on the use by music fans of explicitly community-oriented Internet resources. For this reason, I was intrigued to observe that, during the

early 2000s, goths collectively migrated the majority of their online communications away from collective spaces such as discussion groups in favour of the ostensibly more individual-oriented format of personal journal style blogs.

Lifelog:

a blog whose content is largely focused upon the everyday life of its individual author. Also known as an “online journal”.

Descendants of the phenomenon of the personal homepage, the vast majority of blogs are owned, controlled and updated by a single individual.⁹ An individual emphasis can also be found in the content of many blogs, something particularly apparent in online journal-style blogs (or “lifelogs”¹⁰) which focus upon personal everyday life and tend to be dominated by “I narratives”, rather than discussions of matters of professional or public interest.¹¹ Yet, at the same time, blogs have become increasingly interactive, to the extent that they are regarded by Herring *et al.*¹² as a hybrid format, combining elements of the personal homepage with the interactivity of all-to-all communication facilities.¹³ Such interactivity has prompted some to ask whether individual blogs might have the potential to form the basis for online communities.¹⁴

The blog platform to which UK goths transferred the majority of their online communications was *LiveJournal*, a facility associated particularly with “lifelogs” but equally renowned for its extensive interactive features.¹⁵ In addition to comments and inter-blog hyperlinks, *LiveJournal* offers the capacity regularly to read and comment upon the entries of a self-selected list of *LiveJournal* “friends” via a single “friends page” which automatically collates new entries as they appear. Users can also participate in subject-based “communities” whose content appears on their “friends page” alongside recent entries to individual journals.¹⁶

The migration of goths to *LiveJournal* took place cumulatively, a few individuals initially setting up journals and encouraging others to follow suit both via interpersonal conversation and exchanges on goth discussion groups. Once a significant proportion had set up *LiveJournals*, traffic on goth discussion groups receded significantly, prompting even greater numbers to make the switch. In order to assess what role the use of ostensibly individual-centered online journals might play in respect of the participation of individuals in the goth scene, I set up my own *LiveJournal* and used it as a base to read and interact with the journals of goths using the platform. Additionally, I conducted face-to-face interviews with a total of 15 individuals, all of whom had responded to a request for volunteers posted on my journal. The discussion below illustrates that, although the platform was not overtly community-oriented, the use of *LiveJournal* tended to enhance subcultural participation because it facilitated the development of strong friendships between goths and acted as a valuable means for the transfer of subcultural information, enthusiasm and commodities.

Subcultural Social Networks

Online journals often are characterized as a form of individual diary and, as such, inward looking, self-reflective and private.¹⁷ Indeed, a study by Susan Herring and colleagues found that, compared with other blog genres, online journals tended to involve little if any multi-participant interaction and often did not even utilize reader comments facilities.¹⁸ These findings, from a study which curiously omitted the millions of online journals on the interactive *LiveJournal* platform from its sample, contrasted significantly with the ways in which journals were used by most goths in my study.

As I have argued elsewhere, the use of *LiveJournal* by goths was in some respects significantly more individual-centered than their previous use of collective discussion groups.¹⁹ Most notably, content tended to include a distinctive variety of individual topics rather than being restricted to matters of relevance to the goth community. Meanwhile, although there did exist goth-oriented *LiveJournal* “communities”, my respondents used them sparingly at best, preferring the open-ended individual focus of personal journals.²⁰ Nevertheless, motivations normally associated with diaries such as keeping a detailed personal record, expressing one’s innermost personal feelings or indulging in private reflection or therapy, tended to be regarded as less important than use of the facility for conversation.

Sue: everybody ... likes lots of comments and to start sort of bizarre conversations on their journal—that’s why I do it...

Andy: You want to see how many comments you can get on your post basically isn’t it? I find that anyway.

Sue: ... you’re starting a conversation—that’s what you’re doing. It’s the same as any other conversation—it’s just that the people you want to converse with are not in the same room...

Although such conversations varied in their depth and subject matter, the desire to generate interaction of some kind at times resulted in the posting of rather trivial or meaningless entries:

Lorraine: ... there’s [an] impetus to update even if you’ve nothing to say ... hence posting nonsense ... Mostly I post because I feel like yattering.

The importance of interaction and conversation also was underlined by the fact that individuals often spent more time reading and commenting on other people’s journals than they did updating their own. One respondent suggested that this made *LiveJournal*’s “friends-list” facility particularly invaluable:

Jill: people at the click of a button get all the recent posts from all their people they’ve defined in their lists—they don’t have to search around and go to each individual page ... that is the main appeal, because I will read the friends-list more than I will write my own journal.

Friends-List:

an individually-selected list of other *LiveJournal* users whose most recent journal entries can be displayed together on a single “friends page”. Users can also designate their own journal entries as accessible only to members of their friends-list.

Although it ensured that individuals communicated with a personally hand-picked selection of individuals rather than an all-inclusive “online community”, use of the “friends-list” also functioned to enable regular interaction with a relatively stable set of existing friends, rather than random contact with anonymous strangers.²¹ Respondents frequently emphasized the value of *LiveJournal* as a means to maintain regular contact

with people they had an existing face-to-face relationship with and to keep up with the various events taking place in one another’s lives. Some found *LiveJournal* so useful in this respect that they actively encouraged their goth friends to subscribe to the platform:

Andy: If there’s people I know who don’t have *LiveJournal* I start trying to persuade them to get a *LiveJournal*. It’s purely because ... it’s much easier to keep in touch with people because you automatically ... check it [your “friends page”] everyday ... so you don’t have to make an effort [to actively contact people by phone or email]

While this notion of “keeping in touch” often involved long-established friendships, *LiveJournal* also was used as a means to develop relationships with new contacts who had been encountered briefly in face to face situations. Compared to more direct forms of personal communication such as email or SMS texting, adding someone to your *LiveJournal* “friends-list” equated to an relatively unintrusive invitation to get to know one another better and often enabled one-off meetings to develop into long-term relationships. Roger explains:

Roger: There are people I’ve met briefly in real life and then added them to my “friends-list” –and that’s maintained the relationship when had I just met them face to face and not done anything else, the friendship wouldn’t have evolved ... I think that *LiveJournal* friending is less intrusive than an email to someone. It’s a good way of sounding people out...

As a result of the number of goths who had *LiveJournal* accounts, the practice of swapping *LiveJournal* user names with people has become an integral and somewhat unique aspect of gigs and club nights associated with the subculture, as in the following example:

Andy: I think pretty much everyone on my “friends-list” I personally have met in real life ... You know I met a couple of people I had a laugh with one night at Whitby [goth festival] in November and so it’s like “are you on *LiveJournal*”, “yeah”, “oh excellent right OK”, and you write down names on beer mats and stuff...

While *LiveJournal* contact usually took place after meeting at events, occasionally this could work in reverse; individuals who became aware of one another through mutual participation in comments conversations on the journals of mutual friends would subsequently recognize and speak to one another at goth events. The use of user pictures on *LiveJournal* was important to this process of recognition:

Jill: I saw someone sitting in the corner [of a nightclub] and thought “he looks like the guy that posts to [name] and [name’s] *LiveJournals*” ... So I went up and poked him ... and he went “yes” and he said “you’re a friend of [name’s]” ... With *LiveJournal* it’s different [from email lists] because you’ve got a little picture that’s right by their comments and what they’re saying...

As I have outlined elsewhere, the tendency for people to add existing goth friends to their “friends-lists”, alongside the identification of other users and swapping of usernames at face-to-face goth events, tended to ensure that use of the platform enhanced the communication of goths with one another rather than diversifying their social networks.²² The situation described by Jill was a typical one:

Jill: ... they [*LiveJournal* friends] usually tend to be the same subculture. Not always, there are exceptions ... occasionally ... you get ... family friends or even brothers or sisters, but ... with my chain of friends they tend to be 95% related to the goth scene ... It is cliquy in the sense that goths stick with goths and that—so they’re going to be more related to other goths than they are just anybody else that has a *LiveJournal*.

Although goths were not formally bound together within the confines of a shared discussion group, then, the series of “friends-list” links between their individual journals created an identifiable sub-network on the platform.²³ In the following paragraphs we will see that, by facilitating regular and relatively insular communication between members of the goth scene, use of *LiveJournal* reinforced their practical and emotional participation in the subculture.

Facilitating Subcultural Participation

Wellman and Gulia have distinguished between superficial “weak ties”—which are confined to a narrow shared interest and take place within a single domain—and “strong ties”, which involve extensive familiarity and are played out in a variety of domains.²⁴ Through enabling individual goths to read about and comment upon a variety of aspects of one another’s individual everyday lives, rather than just those aspects directly related

Weak Ties:

narrow social relationships
restricted to a single
shared interest or confined
to a particular site of inter-
action.

Strong Ties:

broad social relationships
which involve extensive
individual familiarity and
are lived out across a vari-
ety of sites of interaction.

to the goth scene, online journals played an important part in the development of strong, intimate relationships between them, which nearly always extended to other forms of interpersonal communication, whether email, online chat, mobile phone or, most importantly, face-to-face interaction. In turn, the development and/or reinforcement of such strong, multiplex ties between goths served to reinforce participants' general sense of investment in and attachment to the goth scene as a community. As Gareth explains, once locked into such a network of close individual relationships within the subculture, there was greater chance of retaining one's enthusiasm for participating in subcultural activities:

Gareth: I think it's fairly cohesive—it interconnects people—it connects them together via this thing ... it doesn't really broaden out to people beyond it [the goth scene] ... when people get into goth and then if they get a *LiveJournal* and connect to all their friends, they're more likely to be influenced by those people and there is a tendency more and more to get trapped ... once they're in there's no escape! (laughs)

Most notably, through facilitating such strong individual relationships, *LiveJournal* use encouraged goths to attend more events related to the subculture in order to see one another face-to-face. While often this involved friends located within the same town or city, it was also common for goths to travel to other parts of the UK in order to go out to events with their *LiveJournal* friends. Meanwhile, as a result of the swapping of *LiveJournal* usernames at goth events, there was a tendency for such trips to result in additional *LiveJournal* contacts—something which in turn would make future expeditions to the same event an even more attractive prospect:

Roger: If you go to a club one weekend and meet somebody, you'll maintain that relationship [via *LiveJournal*] between visits to the club—so your second visit to the club is going to be a better, stronger experience—because your bonds to everyone else in the club are much stronger than they would have been otherwise.

As well as encouraging general subcultural event attendance by enhancing friendships in this way, the use of *LiveJournal* communication also explicitly encouraged people to go out to pubs, clubs or gigs which were the subject of journal entries and/or comments. Although personal journals were connected to individually selected lists of friends rather than to every member of a given community, information about goth events tended rapidly to spread from one journal to another throughout the subcultural network. Furthermore, although among my respondents they tended to be used rather sparingly, *LiveJournal* “communities” oriented to the goth scene often also carried such announcements. Below is the text of an entry on the personal online journal of a goth DJ, in which he announced his involvement in a forthcoming event in London:

» **Dead & Buried Invasion...**

Don Rik and Myself will be guest DJs at the nation's premier Deathrock night - Dead & Buried - next Friday. So rip your fishnet, big up your hair and come down and show us your love!

Come down, you know you want to. Jun. 24th @ 12:41 pm

(8 comments | [Leave a comment](#))

Even more significant than general announcements from organisers were *LiveJournal* posts from individual participants expressing their enthusiasm about events, discussing what to wear, arranging to meet people or merely asking whether their readers were intending to go. More effective than announcements from promoters, this kind of grass-roots collective enthusiasm not only ensured that readers learned about what was happening, but also created the likelihood that they might become caught up in the enthusiasm and make the effort to attend. As Stephen put it:

Stephen: It's a lot easier now to arrange to go out to a club or talk about ... going out in Nottingham rather than Birmingham ... it's easier to put up a flag and say "I'm interested in this, is anyone else?" And when one person does, somebody else goes "oh well if there's a crowd going, then maybe we will as well"...

Meanwhile, it was equally common for those who attended events to post enthusiastic reviews, often complete with photographs, during the following few days, discussing outfits, music and gossip. The effect of such posts, which often prompted equally enthusiastic comments from readers, was to prolong collective enjoyment of such events and to increase the enthusiasm of readers to attend them in the future:

Gareth: ... you're reading people's *LiveJournals* and they say things like "Well I went down Dark Trix [goth night] last night and it was absolutely awesome and I got completely hammered and got off with this excellent girl!" (laughs) and you just go "I'm going down Dark Trix next time!", so that kind of thing is going to interest people and get them more enthused about the goth scene and make them want to go out ...

LiveJournal use tended also to have the effect of connecting goths to specialist networks of music, media and commerce. Subcultural information about Websites, CD releases, fanzines and specialist retailers would appear at frequent intervals. In the following exchange, two respondents discuss the rapid spread of information about a new goth radio show as a result of an initial announcement by one individual:

Andy: Like [name]'s radio show ... my initial thing was to put it on my *LiveJournal* and go "right everybody, this is happening ... try and give [name] a bit of support"...

Veronica: To be fair, from your journal it spread like wildfire.

Meanwhile, *LiveJournal* was regularly used by goths as a means to discuss and exhibit subcultural fashion and appearance. The ability to include images as part of *LiveJournal* entries and in the form of user icons enabled participants to exhibit their appearance to others. While sometimes this was used to present retrospective images of outfits worn to goth events, individuals also would use their journals as a means to consult with friends as to what to wear and how to do their hair and makeup. It was also common for people to post photographs of recently purchased items of clothing, as explained here:

Sean: One thing that *LJ* is better at than mailing lists is that ... I find there's more fashion discussion—people post pictures of fashion and hair and so on ... because it has functionality for photos—people do post photos and you get to see things, rather than going “I got a new pair of leather trousers” people will go “I got these new trousers, look, I'll show you a picture of them!”

The ability to exhibit clothing or other elements of one's appearance in this manner served to reinforce the general enthusiasm of both authors and their readers for working on their appearances—something which long has been a central theme of the goth scene. Meanwhile, in a similar way to the exhibition of style at goth events, the consistent elements of goth style on view served to reinforce the consistency of the goth collective style, while the individual variations, the questions asked and the discussions which took place encouraged those involved to apply a degree of individual innovation and creativity to their own appearance and to draw upon a variety of practical ideas and examples in doing so.

Finally, *LiveJournal* functioned to enhance the direct exchange of music or fashion related subcultural commodities. Sometimes those involved in specialist clothing retail would advertise items for sale on their personal journal, but it was equally common for general participants to post lists of personally owned items for sale to the first person to claim them via a comment. As well as helping individuals to accumulate goth clothes and music, this sort of direct exchange of commodities acted as a complement to more general discussions of fashion, music and events in providing goths with ideas, discussion and enthusiasm for the styles and practices which made their subculture distinctive.

Conclusion

The communication of goths via personal online journals differed considerably from the “virtual communities” or indeed “virtual music scenes” which have sometimes been identified on group discussion forums and also contrasted somewhat with their own previous use of email lists and Usenet groups.²⁵ On *LiveJournal*, the majority of interactions took place on a multi-

plicity of individual spaces rather than a single, all-inclusive community space in which all communication flowed through the center. Yet the intricate connections between the *LiveJournal* use of goths and their existing involvement in the social networks of a multi-domain subculture had led them to utilize the particular mixture of personal and interactive features on offer in a manner which clearly reinforced this subcultural participation. Goths utilized their *LiveJournals* to generate individual-oriented conversation in a way which intensified their networks of strong personal ties with one another and, in so doing, cemented their mutual attachment to the broader off- and online community of which they were a part. Meanwhile, the operation of such friendships, alongside the direct exchange of subcultural information, enthusiasm and commodities via the platform served to act as practical means to enhance participation in the core activities associated with the subculture.

 NOTES

1. Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity 1995).
2. Marion Leonard, "Paper Planes: Travelling the New Grrrl Geographies," *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, Tracy Skelton and Gill Valentine, eds. (London: Routledge 1998).
3. Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community," *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, Steven Jones, ed. (London: Sage 1997).
4. Laura Vroomen, "Kate Bush: Teen Pop and Older Female Fans," *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*, Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson, eds. (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP 2004).
5. Steve Lee and Richard Peterson, "Internet-Based Virtual Music Scenes: The Case of P2 in Al.Country Music," *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*, Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson, eds. (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2004).
6. Andrew Whelan, "'Do U Produce?' Subcultural Capital and Amateur Musicianship in Peer-to-Peer Networks," *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Cultures*, Michael Ayers, ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).
7. Paul Hodkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).
8. Paul Hodkinson, "Net.Goth: Internet Communication and (Sub)Cultural Boundaries," *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzirl, eds. (Oxford: Berg, 2003).
9. Susan Herring, Lois Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus and Elijah Wright, "Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs," Proceedings of the 37th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (2004), <http://csdl.computer.org/comp/proceedings/hicss/2004/2056/04/205640101b.pdf> (accessed April 2005).
10. Frank Schaap, "Links, Lives, Logs: Presentation in the Dutch Blogosphere," *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs*, Laura Gurak, Smiljana Antonijevic, Laurie Johnson, Clancy Ratliff and Jessica Reyman eds., 2004, http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/links_lives_logs_pf.html (accessed April 2005).
11. Adam Reed, "'My Blog is Me': Texts and Persons in UK Online Journal Culture (an Anthropology)," *Ethnos* 70.2 (June 2005).
12. Susan Herring *et al.*, "Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs."
13. Graham Lampa, "Imagining the Blogosphere: An Introduction to the Imagined Community or Instant Publishing," *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs*, Laura Gurak, Smiljana Antonijevic, Laurie Johnson, Clancy Ratliff and Jessica Reyman, eds., 2004, http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual_pf.html (accessed May 2005).
14. Anita Blanchard, "Blogs as Virtual Communities: Identifying a Sense of Community in the Julie/Julia Project," *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs*, Laura Gurak, Smiljana Antonijevic, Laurie Johnson, Clancy Ratliff and Jessica Reyman, eds., 2004, http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual_pf.html (accessed April 2005).
Carolyn Wei, "Formation of Norms in a Blog Community", *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs*, Laura Gurak, Smiljana Antonijevic, Laurie Johnson,

-
- Clancy Ratliff and Jessica Reyman, eds., 2004, http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/formation_of_norms_pf.html (accessed April 2005).
15. Clay Shirky, "A Group is its Own Worst Enemy", *Clay Shirky's Writings about the Internet* (2003), http://www.shirky.com/writings/group_enemy.html (accessed October 2003).
 16. Paul Hodkinson, "Interactive Online Journals and Individualisation," *New Media and Society* (forthcoming in 2006).
 17. Sandeep Krishnamurthy, "The Multidimensionality of Blog Conversations: The Virtual Enactment of September," paper presented at the Association of Internet Researchers conference 3.0, Maastricht, The Netherlands, 2002.
 18. Susan Herring *et al.*, "Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs."
 19. Paul Hodkinson, "Interactive Online Journals and Individualisation."
 20. Paul Hodkinson, "Interactive Online Journals and Individualisation."
 21. Paul Hodkinson, "Interactive Online Journals and Individualisation."
 22. Paul Hodkinson, "Interactive Online Journals and Individualisation."
 23. Paul Hodkinson, "Interactive Online Journals and Individualisation."
 24. Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," *Communities in Cyberspace*, Marc Smith and Peter Kollock, eds. (London: Routledge, 1999).
 25. Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue about Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community."
Steve Lee and Richard Peterson, "Internet-Based Virtual Music Scenes: The Case of P2 in AL.COUNTRY Music."
Paul Hodkinson, "Net.Goth: Internet Communication and (Sub)Cultural Boundaries."

