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Singing Away the Pain: How Emo Gave Kids a Voice

“Poetry is just so emo.” he said. “Oh, the pain. The pain. It always rains. In my soul” is a quote from *Paper Towns*, a novel by popular author John Green. The word “emo” is now a part of our popular lexicon, meaning anything sad or melodramatic, but it had its origin in a popular musical and cultural movement. Emo music began in the 1980s as an offshoot of punk music. The genre itself is usually characterized by the fact that it is some type of rock which contains introspective, vulnerable, and yes, emotional lyrics. It is slightly difficult to define because bands often don’t refer to themselves as emo and also because its musical style shifts by decade. Even within the emo of the 2000s, there is a wide range of sounds from pop punk to screamo to acoustic rock (Richman). Despite this problematic definition, it will have to do, since it has been used by fans, media, and academics to describe an important cultural movement of the 2000s as well. People generally agree that the first emo band was Rites of Spring, which formed in 1984 amongst the Washington DC punk scene. Many punk groups at the time were expressing their anger with the systems of society around them, but Rites of Spring’s lyrics focused on inner turmoil and vulnerability (Richman). They were followed by groups in the 90s like Sunny Day Real Estate and Saves The Day, but emo fully hit the mainstream in the 2000s fronted by groups like My Chemical Romance and Fall Out Boy. In addition to music, emo culture also became a staple of the internet on websites like MySpace, and became characterized by darker fashion, especially heavy eyeliner. This subculture grew in popularity amongst adolescents, and

eventually parents and adults in general began raising concerns about the darkness of the subculture and how nihilistic their children seemed to become while involved in it. It is true that teenagers who listen to genres analogous with emo, like heavy metal and goth, have been shown through studies to be more likely to attempt suicide (Baker et al). Enough people saw this correlation to the point that multiple suicides of teenage girls in the 2000s were blamed on “emo” by high profile media outlets such as *The Daily Mail*. So does the genre bear any actual fault for this? Can emo music or subculture cause adolescents to become depressed or suicidal, or influence them to participate in self-harm practices? Or is the genre a safe haven for mentally ill teens searching for catharsis and belonging? Emo music and subculture have a positive effect on those involved and do not negatively impact their mental health.

What impact does music have overall on a listener’s mental state? Can emo music on its own cause people to be depressed or influence them to harm themselves? The general consensus from scholarly research seems to be that there is little evidence that emo music itself negatively affects the mental health of the listener or causes them to be depressed. However, as stated earlier, adolescents who listen to musical genres analogous to emo do appear to have mental ill health at higher rates. So why might this be the case? Music taste seems to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. What this means is that emo music is not a causal factor to these adolescents' depression, but those who are depressed may be more likely to seek out and enjoy a music genre which centers itself around darker themes and emotional catharsis. For example, an Australian study of year 10 students showed correlations between listening to rock and metal and higher risks of self-harm, suicidal ideation, drug use, and dysfunctional home situations, especially in girls. Other studies conducted in the US found similar correlations, but both stated that the music itself did not increase suicide risk or have a significant effect on anxiety or self-perception

(Baker and Bor 2). This has led researchers to conclude that while a person's music preference may indicate emotional vulnerability, it is not the cause. Adolescents often use music as an escape or a form of self-regulation and tend to seek out genres that validate their thoughts or feelings, so it should not be surprising that depressed teens would seek out emo. Physician Oliver Sacks points out in his book that requiems and laments have a purpose in providing an outlet for feelings of loss and grief, and that catharsis and connection can bring, in the end, consolation (Sacks 299-301). Similarly, Baker and Bor point to empirical evidence that preferred music can have a positive effect on distressed teenagers because of its cathartic nature. It is likely that fans of emo who were already mentally ill due to other factors are seeking relief through the genre.

Music's effect on the mood can also be impacted by how much the listener likes or relates to it. This is a concept that is utilized in music therapy which allows the practitioner to connect with their clients. In a book describing methods for adolescent music therapy, the authors suggest that use of contemporary music is one of the most natural ways for teens to engage in therapy, and they place "a particular emphasis on how little teenagers need to say in order to gain great benefit from sharing songs that are important to them" (McFerran et al 87). Music is not simply a factor, it is personal and relational. This is further illustrated by Marianne Rizkillah, the director of North London's music therapy center. She points out that music allows people to express powerful emotions that language cannot, and that listeners have a direct relationship and connection to the music that they like which may help them feel less alone (Vasques). This deep personal love of a song, genre, or band, especially when they find it relatable, may have a great positive impact on a person. Adolescents who love and feel connected with emo music may feel better after listening to it simply because they enjoy it and because it helps them to contextualize their personal issues, and many fans have attested to this

helpful quality themselves (Vasques). Music goes beyond just how it affects the brain, because it affects the heart too.

Beyond simply having a neutral effect or even a positive effect because of personal preference, rock music, and therefore emo, may have physiological benefits for those who are depressed and/or anxious. A 1998 study performed on chronically depressed girls featured a control group and a group who listened to rock music for approximately twenty minutes. Neither group reported a change in mood, but the girls who listened to the rock music had a decrease in the anxiety hormone cortisol. This shows that even if a listener is not aware of a mood change, music, specifically the genre in question, might have positive effects on biochemical functioning (Brader).

Research into the effects of rock music and music in general on mental health does not show music as a catalyst for mental ill health or harmful behavior. Instead, it shows that listening to music with darker themes may be indicative of struggles, but does not cause them, that whether a person enjoys or connects with the music they listen to will change how it affects them, and that music of this type may even be physiologically beneficial. If the music on its own is not negatively impacting emos' well being, what about the subculture?

Emo subculture offers adolescents a safe space to express their emotions and meet like-minded individuals. The first evidence of this is that the members of the community themselves attest to how it has helped them. In her 2012 paper defending My Chemical Romance and the emo genre in general, Dr. Rosemary Hill gathered quotes and interviewed several fans, asking them to talk about their experiences. Multiple people asserted that emo has given them a sense of individuality against the social pressures of adolescence, and also stated that they were not depressed at all, contrary to popular stereotypes. To quote one fan, "I listen to the music I do

because I love it, it makes me happy and I feel a connection” (Hill 7). This shows that many fans of the genre are perfectly mentally healthy. Others disagreed with the notion that emo culture is what causes self-destructive behavior, instead saying things like “I do get teased for being an emo because some people at school think it’s just about suicide and self-harm. But I think you have to be depressed already to self-harm - and I’m not depressed.” and “It’s really stupid that *The Daily Mail* is saying Hannah killed herself because of [My Chemical Romance]. People kill themselves because of their problems” (Hill 6-7). Far from pushing people to commit suicide, fans of the genre often talk about how it saved their lives or at the very least affected them positively. One man stated that the relatability of the lyrics in emo songs made him feel less alone and hopeless and discussed how going to live gigs gave him a safe space to be himself and have fun (Vasques). A Tumblr account entitled “My Chemical Romance Saved My Life” is dedicated to submissions from fans in which they share how the band helped them or dissuaded them from attempting suicide. A theme in the users’ stories is that emo has told them that it is acceptable to be sad, insecure, or different, which has led to them accepting themselves. These sentiments are reflected in the fan mail that Gerard Way, frontman of My Chemical Romance, has received since the band broke up in 2013. In a blog post regarding this mail, he said, “The amount of gratitude, connection, courage, and positivity contained within them is staggering, and I thank you for everything, for letting me know what music can do for people... [the letters] helped me a great deal, possibly more than some of you feel I helped you” (Garland). Way’s statements reflect another truth: that “this community helps to create a feeling of belonging and sharing among the members and allows them to find solace and acceptance from other teenagers who are experiencing their lives within the same social context” (Zdanow and Wright 96). Adolescents crave social fulfillment just as adults do, and emo provided this for many people.

These personal anecdotes from many different sources showcase that those within this subculture often benefit from it because they find identity, community, and hope.

Emo also has importance from the perspective of gender in that it promotes healthy masculinity and gives girls a voice. In a 2005 journal article, Aaron Anastasi explored the possibility that emo music could be a lament, similar to those of the Bible, for adolescent boys. He points out that boys who show any negative emotion other than anger are often ridiculed for it, and that there is this idea that boys must be tough and strong, never appearing weak. This can be unhealthy and lead to emotional repression and shame. Many emo bands are fronted by young men who are not afraid to encourage vulnerability, and they can be a positive influence on male fans who may be boxed in by societal pressures (Anastasi 13). The music itself can give the space and language many young boys so desperately need to express their emotions and give them healthy coping strategies to process feelings that they would have otherwise pushed down. While boys are important in this conversation, fans of emo are predominantly female (Hill 5). In Hill's interviews, girls spoke on how emo helped them find an individual identity and how it was therapeutic for them. The interests of teen girls are often viewed as frivolous by wider society, and this sexism could be contributing to the idea that emo is simply a "fad," or worse, that girls do not have the critical thinking skills to engage with the things they enjoy properly (Gardner). In reality, the struggles and enthusiasms of adolescent girls have incredible weight, and emo subculture allows them a place to feel heard. Again, it should not be surprising that teenagers seek out communities where they do not have to conform to the stifling expectations placed on them.

The subculture is also made a positive place by the members of the bands who promote hope and advocate for mental health awareness. Gerard Way of My Chemical Romance and Bert

McCracken of The Used have both spoken about their goals as leaders in the community and on the matters of depression and their subculture's reputation. At a concert in 2006, Way announced from the stage to concertgoers that "Nothing is worth hurting yourself over. Nothing is worth taking your life over. Do you understand?" after accusations in the news about them being a suicide cult (Isabel). McCracken agrees that music has saved his life too and said "...when I'm the lowest I've ever felt I know that I can put on music and wait through that hell. I know I'm going to feel different, if not the next day then the day after that" (Garland). Fall Out Boy's Pete Wentz spoke in an interview with MTV about his own bipolar disorder and suicide attempts and how penning lyrics helped him process his emotion, saying, "I love writing and being able to write... and then have people actually react to it. You know, when someone comes up to me and says, like, 'your band saved my life', and I'm thinking in my head in a weird way, my band saved my life too...the greatest thing about it is that it's therapeutic" (Wentz). These well-known icons of the genre act as role models by discouraging self-destructive behaviors and encouraging discussion of mental health, as well as speaking to its therapeutic value. The non-profit organization To Write Love On Her Arms, whose goal is to help people struggling with mental illness and addiction, was also a staple in the emo subculture in the 2000s. They traveled with Warped Tour for ten years, and many famous bands such as Paramore and Panic! at the Disco promoted their work on MySpace and wore their merchandise during shows. Founder Jamie Tworkowski's hope for the organization was that they could help adolescents move beyond simply self-regulating with music and encourage them to seek personal and professional help for their mental illnesses (Goldfine). The benefits of this subculture lie in the destigmatization and normalization of pain and depression, which can empower adolescents to feel more comfortable

actually asking for help. Far from enabling a vicious cycle, many of the notable figures of emo promote recovery and strength.

Many of the lyrics and messages of emo songs are honest, hopeful, and encourage a fighting spirit. It is true that My Chemical Romance's albums revolve around the concept of death, but far from encouraging its listeners to pursue it themselves, they instead reflect upon the mortality of every human in a compelling and comforting way. The last song on their 2006 album *The Black Parade* features the line "I am not afraid to keep on living", which fans have not been shy to point out when their love of the genre is criticized (Garland). Their 2012 song *The Light Behind Your Eyes* features the lyrics "If I could be with you, tonight / I would sing you to sleep / Never let them take / The light behind your eyes", an explicitly anti-suicide message. Other groups have songs which center pain and healing in a profound way, such as Paramore with their 2007 song *When It Rains*, with lyrics like "You made yourself a bed / At the bottom of the blackest hole / And convinced yourself that it's not the reason / You don't see the sun anymore" followed by "Take these chances to turn it around / Just take these chances, we'll make it somehow". Emotional doesn't only mean sad, it means joyful and hopeful as well, and the lyrics from the 2002 song *A Taste for Ink* by The Used became a memorable motto for many emos with the words "So here I am alive at last / And I'll savor every moment of this". As shown by these examples, many of the lyrics and themes of the emo genre give an outlet to process loss, grief, and the knowledge of one's own mortality as well as offering encouragement and rallying cries for the broken, the beaten, and the damned.

To summarize, emo subculture has a theme of community, individuality, resilience, and vulnerability. Its members see the importance of allowing themselves to feel their darkest emotions so that they can begin to build themselves up again with the support of profound lyrics

and like-minded friends. And its leaders want to provide a safe space for their fans and bring more awareness to mental illness and recovery. If the subculture's impact is generally positive, then why are people so critical? Why might someone believe that the music or the culture is causing adolescent depression, self-injury, and suicide?

The first reason a person might think this is the assertion that emo music causes listeners to feel worse and contains lyrics that encourage self-harm. There are good reasons for people to think this. Some studies show that "sad" music affects people who are already depressed more negatively than mentally healthy people because they have a tendency to ruminate over their problems (Garrido). When one ruminates, they become stuck in negative patterns of thinking and find it difficult to pull themselves out again. However, when a person listens to "happy" music, even the severely depressed feel better afterwards. It is understandable based on this research and common sense correlation why there is concern about emo depressing adolescents, especially since it is known as a "sad" genre. There have also been some emo artists that have written songs with questionable lyrics, such as Hawthorne Heights with the well-known line "Cut my wrists and black my eyes / So I can fall asleep tonight or die" or Bayside with "Take this razor, sign your name across my wrists / So everyone will know who left me like this" (Garland). Songs like these quite obviously glorify death and marry it with romance and could influence vulnerable teenagers harmfully.

However, these criticisms do not take into account certain things. Firstly, defining what "sad" music is and what "happy" music is is a complicated endeavor. Is sadness measured by the tonality of the music, or the themes and lyrics in the song, or whether an individual says the song makes them sad? These terms are nebulous and may be used differently by different people to describe different things. Those who conducted the study also mentioned that listeners reported

feeling better after listening to songs that made them happy (Garrido). This refers back to assertions made by music therapists that music is healing and helpful when a person relates to it and enjoys it. If someone who self-identifies as emo claims that emo music makes them happy, and the music itself is not a causal factor for depression as demonstrated earlier, then in some instances emo music cannot be considered “sad” at all. As for the lyrics, it is fair to be concerned about the negativity and rashness they promote. But as Garland points out, demonizing the whole genre because of a few concerning songs ignores the enormous benefit of other prominent lyrical themes within emo. This culture opened the doors for many adolescents to discuss mental health openly and many of its most influential artists wrote explicitly anti-suicide songs and penned poignant lyrics about loss and grief that were more cathartic than inflammatory.

A second reason a person might criticize emo is because they believe that emo culture and social groups lead adolescents to harm themselves or commit suicide. Again, there is some corroboration for this. A 2012 study on the themes and trends of emo Facebook groups and forums showed the normalization and glorification of self-harm amongst members and pointed out that many users were nihilistic and felt looked down upon for their emo identity. Some of these boards were titled things like “Why everything sucks”, “**Cutting**” and “Kill yourself...” and featured posts saying things like “I might just [commit suicide], no one would miss me anyways” and “Cutting is a good way to get out stress. Better than drugs.” (Zdanow and Wright). Posts like these are cause for concern as self-destructive behavior is encouraged and justified and can create a group environment in which already impressionable teenagers may attempt to fit in with other emos who promote self-injury. Blogger Sasha Carney, who attests to being an emo herself as a teenager, writes about how mentally ill people triggering one another online under the guise of alternative subculture was unhealthy for her and many others. It is clear

that focus on dark themes and mental illness by an entire subculture can lead to extremes especially in online communities.

Despite all this, I would like to posit that emo subculture has a larger benefit than harm. Even amongst posts glorifying cutting, personal issues at home and school are cited. One user wrote, "I really don't care what my family thinks of me. My mom's a drug addict and my dad abandoned me... I live in a town I hate while the city I love is 6 hours away from me. I'm friendless in this town, and loved in the city. Does anyone wish to argue with me about why I cut my wrists?" (Zdanow and Wright 90). While there may be posts of people glorifying their own cutting or viewing it as beneficial, there is not a trend of people actively telling others to cut. The only users encouraging this behavior are those who are there to mock emos, often with homophobic remarks. Other posts, if rare in these forums, showed users imploring others to stop cutting themselves. While some emos may romanticize the behavior, many decry it, including the prominent figures of the scene. All in all, this study expresses concern about these forums, which is valid, but admits that further research is required to actually establish a causal link between social media, emo subculture, and suicide, and seems to be less about the subculture itself and more about the consequences of unregulated internet spaces, which is a separate topic. Regardless, the general consensus among fans of the genre is that it has been a positive influence, and the many stories where people attest to emo saving their life supersede the unfortunate negative experiences.

A third reason someone might criticize emo is the idea that it is leading to moral fallout amongst adolescents. It is easy to understand why a parent of a previously happy child who is now depressed and self-harming might look to outward changes in fashion or music taste because they do not know what else to blame. This is exactly what Hannah Bond's parents chose

to do after her tragic suicide in 2008 to the point that they spoke to *The Daily Mail* about it, as did other concerned parents (Rawstorne). The resulting article is full of hyperbolic statements and directly links emo to suicide based on opinions, presuppositions, and stereotypes alone. Australian media implicated emo in the 2007 murder of fifteen-year-old Carly Ryan, and in the 2007 double suicide of two adolescent girls. One article claimed that “this generic misery music is selling suicide to our youth” (Phillipov 60). The media’s response to these tragedies is characteristic of a moral panic, which Phillipov defines as a political intervention into the lives of young people in order to preserve the existing social order and moral values which certain subcultures might be rebelling against. A similar concern formed around heavy metal in the 1980s, with the publicization of suicides, as well as a lawsuit against the band Judas Priest which claimed that subliminal messages in their music had caused two fans to kill themselves (Hill 5). Many parents, as well as the media, have this idea that emo is not only something that can cause harm, it is inherently corrupt. *The Daily Mail* calls it a “sinister cult”, and portrays emo as something out to “get” children.

This is an unfortunate perspective to have on emo music and culture, because in many cases, it lacks nuance. Even the *Daily Mail* article in question admits that “just what directed Hannah Bond's behaviour on that tragic September night last year will never be known” (Rawstorne). People do not just commit suicide because of one factor; there is usually a build-up of mental ill health and many adverse experiences beforehand, and the only person who can say why a suicide happens with full certainty is the person committing it. It is rather sad that these girls’ tragic ends were sensationalized and politicized to fit a media narrative, especially when there was little empirical evidence to support their claims. So what evidence does exist? In the case of the 1980s heavy metal panic, the case against Judas Priest was dismissed, and research

performed in the 1990s showed that metal music actually calms rage and anger rather than instigating it (Hill 5). Even on a logical basis, it does not make much sense for adolescents to seek out things that they know make them feel depressed or suicidal, and none of these panics have questioned what other things may be causing this melancholy amongst teens, they have simply put forth a music genre and culture as a scapegoat (Hill 5). Phillipov also discusses this in her article regarding the media's response to these issues and points out that concerns about "emo" are often simply concerns about broader trends within adolescents in general: the use of social media and unregulated internet spaces, bullying at school, and increased rates of mental illness and self harm. No studies show that self-harm is higher amongst emos specifically, but some do say that 20% of adolescents as a whole group are participating in self-injury to regulate their stress (Phillipov 67). It is easy to stick a label onto something and blame the whole of it in order to avoid the real complexities of issues like adolescent mental health, and this seems to be what many people have done.

While certain connotations and inherent qualities of emo can become extreme to the point of glorifying self-injury and suicide, the overall net effect of the culture has been positive or neutral, and claims otherwise are often not properly directed to the source of the actual problem, not fully substantiated, or even not made in good faith at all.

So, knowing all this information, what effect does emo music and subculture have on mental health? Firstly, the music itself is not a causal factor, but the emo genre is correlated with mental illness, likely because the listeners are seeking out catharsis and understanding in the lyrical and musical themes. Secondly, self-identified emos appreciate the culture for offering them a safe space to express their feelings and helping them to feel less alone. Emo culture also promotes healthy ideas of masculinity and offers a haven for female fans. Many bands within the

culture speak of a desire to help people through their music which includes penning lyrics about loss, grief, hope and strength, but also encourage adolescents to seek professional help for their problems. Thirdly, many people feel negatively about emo for various reasons, some of which are reasonable concerns, but they are often either negligible, misplaced, or hyperbolic in nature. With all this said, we can conclude that emo music and subculture have a positive effect on adolescents and their mental health. So why does any of this matter in the first place? What can this discussion and controversy teach us? It is important to remember that adolescence is a formative time for people. It is when a person starts to mold their identity, their likes and dislikes, their passions, and their adult personality. It is also a time of immense change and anxiety, especially in our current world with the newness of the internet and social media, which no one fully knows how to manage yet. Realizing this allows a person to understand why so many teenagers gravitated towards emo in the 2000s and continue to gravitate toward similar cultures today, and it is because it gave them permission to feel all those complicated emotions that come along with growing up which have only been amplified by our modern society. Emo centered the conversation around mental health and around the uncomfortable feelings of despair, doubt, and disillusionment, and as Anastasi says, "Naming allows pain to become owned and better understood, and to eventually be consolable". Nothing but professional treatment can fully solve mental health problems, but emo provided kids with language to express their condition, and it is very telling that many adults blamed the subculture for their kids' issues instead of simply listening to what kids were actually saying. How can we do better? Firstly, we can treat teenagers with compassion, empathy, and dignity, instead of assuming that they are naive, stupid, or acting out for attention. Secondly, we can be more careful when coming to conclusions about what the cause of something might be, especially something as nuanced as

mental illness. And thirdly, we can strive to be more open-minded about subcultures that might defy normality in some way. Just because something is darker or does not follow convention does not mean it is evil; critical thinking is required to decipher whether this is the case. Music is a powerful thing, and possibly the most important takeaway from this is that what it means to someone, whether it helps them or makes them happy, is what gives it such profound meaning. Nobody should deprive anyone else of that experience if it can be helped.

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