Emo: The Paradox of Contemporary Youth Culture

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Back in the distant days of the early 2000s, my two teenage sons both became 'emos'. They formed guitar bands with their friends, played gigs in dodgy pubs, and recorded EPs. They wore skinny jeans, black T-shirts with obscure band logos, and skater shoes. Both had long hair carefully draped over one eye, although neither went so far as eyeliner or piercings. They collected CDs by bands like Coheed and Cambria, Say Anything and Taking Back Sunday, and spent hours poring over guitar solos. When Nathan, aged 18, separated from his then girlfriend, he recorded an entire CD of songs filled with despair and bitterness, going under the name of 'The Futile'. Louis, three years younger, struggled a little to keep up, and was probably always more of a 'pop punk'. At the time, both would probably have balked a little at the label 'emo', although they now look back to it with an air of affectionate nostalgia.

Adults of my generation tend to discuss contemporary youth culture in tones of regret: it's not like it was in my day. When we were young, youth culture was authentic, non-commercial, and rebellious. Today, it's just superficial and consumerist: it's not really *proper* youth culture at all. Whether or not this is true, emo might seem to represent an exception to the general rule. There were undoubtedly several ways of 'being emo', but there was nevertheless a defined style, a specific musical genre (or set of genres), and a kind of shared emotional mindset. On the face of it, emo looked like a genuine youth subculture. And yet, like my teenage sons, many 'emos' appeared ambivalent about being categorized in this way. The term itself seemed inherently disparaging, although for some it was an identity that seemed to be embraced almost in a spirit of self-parody.

So what was emo? To what extent can we pin it down, or draw a line around it? Was it a genuine expression of adolescent angst, or a manufactured pose? Did it ever really exist, or was it a myth – an illusory teenage fad that was doomed to live forever in scare quotes? And what might these paradoxes tell us about the continuing evolution of youth subcultures in the twenty-first century?

Defining emo

'Emo' is short for 'emotional'. Many believe the term first arose in the mid-1990s as a way of defining a new musical genre, 'emotional hardcore': what was initially termed 'emo-core' was eventually shortened further to become 'emo'. Various waves of emo music can be identified, but the term really took off around the turn of the century, with the release of a series of compilation albums called *Emo Diaries* on the US label Deep Elm. The heyday of emo was relatively short, for reasons I will try to explain, although elements of it are still continuing. As I write, (arguably) emo

bands like You Me At Six and My Chemical Romance have upcoming gigs at a large venue in my neighbourhood; and there is plenty of evidence of 'emo nostalgia' on social media platforms.

A dictionary definition of emo would probably start with the music. Wikipedia, for instance, spends several thousand words cataloguing the mutating memberships of various (almost exclusively American) bands. On this account, emo emerged from the meeting between post-punk hardcore (with elements of thrash and grunge) and a softer-edged indie (or alternative) style: Black Flag meets Nirvana meets Morrissey, perhaps. This new style was less aggressive and more melodic than hardcore; but it was also more personal and introspective, and less overtly political. As the name suggests, many emo lyrics were full of teenage vulnerability and longing: they offer intense, poetic expressions of misery, bitterness and nostalgia, alternately sung in a sensitive, almost crooning style, and then screamed over heavy, thrashing guitars.

However, it would be a mistake to see this as simply about the music, or indeed the fans of the music. Like earlier youth cultures, emo also entailed a particular visual appearance, in terms of clothing, hair and make-up. And, as we shall see, both the music and the visual style went along with a particular emotional mindset, and to some extent with a blurring of gender boundaries. The emotional sensitivity of emo led some to argue that it glamourised and encouraged self-harm, and even suicide. It is in these areas that we need to assess emo's claim to be a subculture, rather than simply another musical genre.

Claiming authenticity

The immediate difficulty here, however, is to do with *authenticity*. How does one write about such a phenomenon without the inverted commas – and without enraging those who see themselves as guardians of the truth of youth culture? Wikipedia, like many other sources, tells an 'origin story', whereby the true essence of the culture was somehow inevitably corrupted by the forces of corporate capitalism. This is a familiar mythological narrative in accounts of youth culture; although in this case there are many who argue that the very category itself – 'emo' – was somehow instantly inauthentic from the start. Emotional hardcore, we are told, grew up from the grassroots, the underground, outside the evil commercial mainstream: it was truly independent of the capitalist music industry. Emo, by contrast, was the sellout version: the 'emo kids' – both the bands and their fans – were the followers, the wannabees, the insincere high-school kids who were buying into the real thing.

The media are seen to play several functions here. As we shall see, mainstream news media tend to misrepresent such phenomena, and generate bouts of moral panic about them; while social media provide a forum both for members of the subculture itself, and for those who abuse and attack them. However, 'niche' media, especially the music press, and the self-declared experts who work for them, also play a key role.

Mitch Daschuk provides a detailed account of how music journalists both provoked the emergence of emo as a distinctive phenomenon – not least by labelling it – and

yet also attempted to question its legitimacy. He argues that these commentators (most of whom were significantly older than the performers and the fans they were writing about) sought to maintain their own power and authority by constantly drawing and redrawing the line between the 'underground' and the 'mainstream', or the authentic and the inauthentic. As the commentary proliferated, these distinctions became more nuanced and more complicated: it was important to distinguish, not just between emo and not-emo, or between 'independent' emo and 'mainstream' emo, but between several varieties of each of them. According to Daschuk, many of these commentators were identified with the older hardcore punk scene, and were keen to prevent younger 'pretenders' – those whom they termed the 'emo kids' – getting in on the act. 'Emo' was a pejorative term from the outset, and its followers were implicitly condemned as mere subcultural tourists.

From this perspective, mainstream success and popularity are somehow inherently incompatible with authenticity. Emo represents the domestication or suburbanization of hardcore punk – and the neutralizing of its political threat. Emo, the critics argued, was much more consumerist and conformist than the styles that preceded it; and it was certainly more white, and more middle-class. They pointed with disgust to the rapid appearance of emo within the mainstream media – features about 'how to be emo' or 'guides to emo' in *Seventeen* or *Entertainment Weekly*, or on network television – and the merchandising of emo in mall chains like Hot Topic and Blue Banana. When the bland teen-pop icon Justin Bieber began to take on elements of the emo style, it was merely the logical consequence of this betrayal by packaging. And when 'emos' started to appear in British soap operas like *Coronation Street* and *Hollyoaks*, the game was well and truly over.

Yet this story of 'sellout' is one that belies the inevitably commercial and mediated nature of all youth cultures. Even the Sex Pistols, the heroes of punk, were signed to major labels, and managed by an individual with much more than an eye on the main commercial chance. While they might proclaim a 'DIY' (do it yourself) ethic, the musicians and their fans in such alternative scenes are bound to develop their own economy, from music venues and publications through to the enormous proliferation of merchandising (clothing, imagery and accessories), now massively aided by the internet. There are always key intermediaries and entrepreneurs working from the 'inside' – most notably record labels – that seek to play these markets, however much they may be criticized by the holders of the true faith. (In the case of emo, Vagrant Records' founder Rich Egan seems to occupy the demonic impresario role once assumed by Malcolm McLaren in the age of punk.)

Likewise, even alternative styles are crucially dependent upon mainstream media, both to ensure public visibility and to provide the establishment condemnation that is essential to their credibility (again, the Sex Pistols' pivotal appearance on the BBC's *Nationwide* in 1976 is a case in point). And, as Daschuk observes, these critical commentators themselves are often dependent on the commercial forces that they deride – for example, featuring emo performers on the covers of their apparently alternative publications in order to guarantee better sales.

Of course, there is bound to be a historical trajectory here. It takes time for the mainstream media to catch on to emerging trends – and as we shall see, they frequently get them wrong, and panic as they do so. As soon as the style comes onto

the mainstream radar, it begins to lose its authenticity in the eyes of those commentators whose authority depends upon them remaining in the minority, ahead of the game. Part of the issue here is to do with age. Those who seek to preserve the authenticity of the subculture are often older than those who subsequently try to gain access to it. Emo was very definitely a younger scene than hardcore and some of the other styles that preceded it: many of the bands themselves were made up of teenagers (or at least those in their early twenties), and most of the fans were schoolchildren. For many older critics and commentators – especially music journalists – this presented a golden opportunity for sarcastic condemnation of those who might find it harder to speak back.

In search of emo

All this makes a phenomenon like emo very hard to identify and pin down. This is especially difficult given what seems like an ever-increasing pace of change. The *Guardian* music journalist Alexis Petridis argues that, in the age of the internet, the life-cycle of youth cultures – the formation, dissolution and reformation of subcultural styles – is now operating in a much more accelerated way. As he notes, this seems to generate a kind of instant knowing irony, and even self-parody:

> *In search of latterday youth subcultures, I'm pointed in various directions by various people, but I invariably can't work out whether what I'm looking at is meant to be serious or a joke: never really a problem in the days when members of different youth cults were prepared to thump each other. There's plenty of stuff that seems weird and striking and creative out there, but there's something oddly self-conscious and non-committal about it: perhaps that's the result of living in a world dominated by social media, where you're under constant surveillance by your peers.*

Petridis's comments here are very pertinent to emo in particular. In fact, as we shall see, members of other subcultural groups were quite frequently prepared to 'thump' emos (physically or verbally). The role of social media is also perhaps more complex than he suggests – and this is another topic that I shall consider in due course. But the sense that emo was simultaneously 'self-conscious and non-committal' – that it was both serious and somewhat of a joke – very much coincides with my own experience of looking back and trying to understand what it was all about.

Reading emo

Over the past twenty years, academics have tied themselves in knots attempting to find effective ways of understanding the changes in contemporary youth cultures. This isn't the place to go into details, but the fundamental debate is to do with the concept of 'subculture' itself. Even if the youth cultures of the 1960s and 1970s (mods, rockers, hippies, skinheads, punks…) could usefully be seen as subcultures, how far does the idea still apply? Are youth cultures today as clearly defined – and indeed as subversive – as those of earlier decades appeared to be? Do they still express or resist forms of subordination and oppression – especially in terms of social class? Some have argued that we should be talking in terms of 'post-

subcultures', 'tribes' or 'scenes' – ideas that all attempt to encapsulate the more hybrid, diverse and flexible nature of contemporary youth cultures.

These ideas might be relevant to apply, for example, to phenomena like the rave and clubbing scenes of the 1990s and beyond. However, other contemporary groups – such as Goths – seem to display many of the characteristics of 'classic' 1970s subcultures. They are quite clearly defined, for example through the distinctive visual appearance of their members, and through shared cultural tastes (not only in music, but also in visual arts and literature). They also share what I have been vaguely calling a 'mindset' – a set of philosophical, emotional and psychological dispositions that might more grandly be called a 'worldview' or a 'structure of feeling', or even an 'ideology'. Adherents tend to have a strong and stable commitment to such groups, and to remain with them over the longer term.

The question is whether – despite Alexis Petridis's comments above – emo can be seen as a subculture in this sense. To some extent, I think it can. The classic academic analyses of youth subcultures tend to look for 'homologies', or similarities across a range of elements such as music, style and fashion, as well as this broader worldview. Although it is diverse and hard to pin down, emo can certainly be typified in these ways.

In terms of music, emo emerged at the crossover between a range of styles and genres – most obviously classic punk, hardcore, grunge, heavy metal, nu metal and indie, although it also has elements of new wave and (in some cases) even prog rock. It builds on strong elements of its most obvious forebear, hardcore: distorted guitars, 8/4 or 16/4 time signatures, fairly simplistic major chord progressions (I, IV, V) and shouted or screamed vocals. At gigs, this style would mostly be accompanied by displays of anarchic slam dancing, mock fighting and crowd surfing in the mosh pit close to the stage. However, emo bands typically combined this with aspects of indie rock and more mainstream pop: slower, more melodic elements, a greater vocal range and a quieter, more sensitive singing style, and more complex chords (minor, altered and diminished). These two styles would frequently alternate in sections of a song, in the style known (ironically) as 'screamo'. As I have noted, lyrics were typically introverted and melancholic, focusing on feelings of hurt, insecurity and self-pity, and on unrequited love or doomed relationships rather than on politics or social issues.

Emo fashion is perhaps even easier to identify – or at least to sum up in a set of stereotypical characteristics. The range of images I have used to illustrate this piece give some visual indication of this – although having harvested them (somewhat arbitrarily) from the internet, it's hard to vouch for their authenticity. Some appear to be from fashion industry sources, which would suggest that they are idealized rather than representative of everyday 'street style'; although even what appear to be amateur selfies should be read with caution.

Here again, the style overlaps with several others – most obviously Goth, although there are also elements of the more 'adorned' styles of punk and new wave, as well as the anti-fashion of grunge and the causal style associated with skateboarding, BMX and extreme sports. Both males and females were likely to wear skinny, low-rise black jeans, dark t-shirts or hoodies with band logos and designs, canvas trainers or

skater shoes (or sometimes heavy boots), and thick belts adorned with large buckles and keychains. The hairstyle was perhaps even more distinctive: mostly dyed jet black, occasionally with streaks or tints of other colours, hair was worn straight and draped over one eye. Appearance was also modified with tattoos and body piercings (especially double lip piercing, and sometimes in the tongue or the back of the neck); and young men as well as women could wear eye-liner. The idealized emo body type was thin rather than muscular, and the skin should ideally be pale and emaciated (emos were almost invariably white Caucasian).

Of course, these taxonomies sound a little like 'how to be emo' guides, of the kind one might find in mainstream teen magazines – or indeed the 'is my child an emo?' articles written for worried parents. In fact, there is even a book-length version of this, *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*, which goes into much greater detail. The authors, 'alternative' music journalists Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley, provide extensive lists of emo taste, style and etiquette, albeit with a considerable degree of sarcasm. This kind of guidance is symptomatic of the self-consciousness and self-parody of emo, noted above. The problem, however, is that it exists primarily for the benefit of outsiders, or wannabees: for those who are living the life, it seems at best superfluous, and at worst stereotypical and patronising.

Like other musical genres, emo was diverse and hybrid; and emo fashion was not a uniform. Both evolved over time. Nevertheless, it was a distinctive style, which was disseminated globally, not least through social media platforms such as Live Journal and My Space (as we shall see). In my own research, I found evidence that emo was a recognizable youth style not only in the US and Western Europe, but in locations as diverse as South Africa, Latin America, the Soviet Union and rural Australia.

Screening emo

One accessible means of exploring how these different musical and visual elements fit together (the homologies) is by studying music videos. Of course, music videos are not documentaries: they are essentially marketing tools designed to sell products (whether in the form of music or other merchandise, or tickets to live events). Nevertheless, in this section, I'll give a brief commentary on some representative popular videos, grouped under four sub-categories: many of these have tens of millions of views and extensive pages of comments on You Tube (where they can all be found).

Pop punk was perhaps a precursor of emo, rather than emo proper. Yet pop punk videos do convey some of the more fun-loving, enthusiastic and ironic elements that surface from time to time in emo itself. Videos often feature performances in incongruous settings: 'You're Not Alone' by Home Grown shows the band performing in a busy diner, while 'Fat Lip' by Sum 41 features them rapping in a Korean convenience store, along with wild outdoor dance sequences. 'My Friends Over You' by New Found Glory is almost a (self-)parody of a music video performance, complete with comic elements (sexy women wearing cut-off t-shirts labelled 'typical video girls') and special effects (exaggeratedly large heads and speeded-up animated leg movements). As the band members 'perform', they play video games, eat pizza and have tattoos applied, and the video culminates with the

audience beating cardboard cut-outs of the band. The music is dominated by rough-edged guitars, but (as with the Sex Pistols and other allegedly anarchic punk bands) much of it is crisply performed, conventionally structured pop, with anthem-like choruses and melodic hooks.

More **mainstream emo** videos tend to be more serious in their approach. Dashboard Confessional's 'Screaming Infidelities' is about betrayal and heartbreak, following the story of a doomed love affair from the first kiss to the suggestion of a suicide attempt. 'Beauty In The Breakdown' by the Scene Aesthetic depicts another ill-fated couple as they reluctantly part (seemingly forever, but for reasons unclear) at an airport; while a similar scenario is played out in 'A Movie Script Ending' by Death Cab for Cutie. All three feature acoustic guitars and frail, somewhat choked vocals: the overall musical style seems closer to a romantic pop boy-band than to the ragged fury of hardcore. The performers (and especially the female love-objects) in these videos also appear fairly conventional and clean-cut, despite the occasional discreet piercing.

By contrast, the narrative of Hawthorne Heights' 'Ohio Is For Lovers' is rather more oblique, although there is also a strong sense of nostalgia for a lost childhood love here. In this case, the quiet sensitive sections alternate with thrashing guitars and screaming (or whining) vocals, which explicitly refer to self-harm ('cut my wrists and black my eyes/because you kill me/my final breath is gone'), as the band performs in a dusty cellar. Meanwhile, 'I'm Not Okay' by My Chemical Romance seems to parody this sense of isolation and alienation, telling an ironic 'revenge of the nerds' story set in an elite private high school.

These elements of irony and (deliberate or accidental) self-parody are even more evident in what might be called **camp emo**. Here, the influence of early 1980s new wave styles – especially the New Romantics – is surprisingly evident. 'I Write Sins Not Tragedies' by Panic at the Disco stages an elaborate scenario in which a troupe of circus clowns disrupts a bizarre wedding, in a manner that recalls Adam Ant. Meanwhile, 'The Curse of Curves' by Cute Is What We Aim For resembles nothing more than a Duran Duran video: the band, with emo haircuts but attired in 1980s suits, sit eating dinner at an upmarket restaurant as they exchange meaningfully sexy glances with their Vogue-model guests. Like a great many of these videos, the narrative seems to be driven by a kind of adolescent male wish-fulfillment that is very hard to take seriously.

Finally, there are more **intellectual emo** videos, which tend to be more ambitious and more 'adult', both musically and in their visual scenarios. Coheed and Cambria's 'A Favor House Atlantic' contains typically ornate prog guitar, albeit set against a familiar narrative of overweight rock geeks being pursued by (or pursuing) Vogue-model women, and one scene that appears to depict oral sex with a transvestite. 'Alive with the Glory of Love' by Say Anything tells a story of two children escaping from what appears to be a kind of prison camp, evading their guards and making their way to a band performance in the forest. The lyric is about love against the odds, but the narrative is somewhat more political. In both cases, the band members are older than the majority of emo performers (and their fans), and dress in a much more nondescript grungey style. Finally, 'Juneau' by the British band Funeral for a Friend shows the band performing in a house, intercut with

disturbing and unexplained scenes of destruction occurring in the other rooms – an elderly couple dancing and pillow-fighting, a man collapsing in a shower, a cheerleader headbanging, a businessman smashing up furniture. While the band itself undoubtedly displays the requisite emo appearance, and the music alternates between thrash and calm in the 'screamo' style, the video is more avant-garde in its approach.

This brief description suggests some of the diversity of emo, both musically and in terms of visual and narrative style. Indeed, in some ways it reinforces the difficulty of defining the musical genre, let alone establishing its credentials as a 'subculture'. Yet one of the most striking things about accessing these videos is the enormous number of views they have generated ('I Write Sins Not Tragedies' had no fewer than 183 million hits at the time of writing), and the extensive comments that accompany them. Most viewers seem to have little hesitation in categorizing these videos as 'emo', and many of them express a great nostalgia for emo as a lost period of their early teens. The time has gone so fast, they say, I wish we could be back at school. Their 'My Space' days are gone, but wouldn't it be great if emo could come back? As we have seen, nostalgia for childhood – or at least for a time of innocence – is itself a common theme in several of these songs and videos. But in the users' comments there is often a mixture of affection and irony – both of which can be seen as elements of the emo 'mindset', the repertoire of feelings that it embodies.

A structure of feeling

As I have argued, emo was not just about music and fashion: it also had a distinctive 'structure of feeling' – a set of emotions and orientations that amounted to a kind of mindset or worldview. These are vague terms, I admit, but they identify something that is arguably characteristic of all youth subcultures. Indeed, it's very easy to reduce subcultures to a single aspect of this kind – the aggression of the skinheads, the euphoria of the hippies – and to trace this to particular psychological or socio-political causes. However, this doesn't do justice to the clustering of such emotions, their diversity and their occasional contradictions. Punks, for example, were by turns aggressive and depressed; they could be apathetic, but they could also be politically engaged; they sought attention, but then they couldn't care less. And when we look at the detail, none of this structure of feeling can be straightforwardly attributed to working-class resistance, or alienation from consumer society, or even plain old teenage rebellion.

These emotional mind-sets are often seen to have chemical origins: the mods are frequently 'explained' by their preference for amphetamines, the hippies by marijuana and LSD, ravers by ecstasy. However, this doesn't always apply. Unlike some other youth cultures, emo did not appear to have its signature drug – not even anti-depressants. Indeed, there was some overlap in this respect between emo and straight edge, a subculture that strongly rejects all forms of artificial stimulants.

As the term implies, emo appeared to be all about emotion: it wore its heart on its sleeve. And on the face of it, emos were not too happy. The lyrics of emo songs, the interactions online, and interviews of the time, depict a particular emotional universe: a world of despair, bitterness, regret and self-loathing. Emos were defined

by their shared willingness to confess their experiences of loss and heartbreak, and of personal inadequacy and alienation: they seemed to be torn apart by difficult, turbulent feelings they could not fully explain. While the subculture itself provided support, and while the music enabled a kind of cathartic release, it was precisely these expressions of emotional vulnerability that attracted ridicule: according to its critics, emo was just a matter of immature self-pity. In the name of a popular emo podcast of the time, emos were just cry-babies.

And yet there are questions about how this emotionality should be interpreted, and the extent to which it should be taken at face value. In his book-length study of emo, the music journalist Andy Greenwald persistently links emo to what he clearly regards as essential qualities of teenagerhood:

> *You are disenfranchised, your parents don't understand you. You like girls/boys, they don't like you. You are smart, but not smart enough. You are too fat. You are too thin. You have to get into college but you have to finish your eighteen extracurricular activities first. Your best friend betrays you, your girlfriend/boyfriend cheats on you... People are mean to you. Again and again and again. When you come home from school, you sit in the bathroom and cry for an hour. Every day.*
>
> *With the door closed, you turn on your stereo. Someone is singing about problems just like yours. They're not commenting on them, not judging them, just echoing them, making them real, validating them. You sing along and your tears dry up. You switch on your computer. You're safe in your room. You control everything. You're alone. But you check your buddy list and know, you're anything but alone.*

The cultural context here is fairly specific (the eighteen extracurricular activities, for example), but the picture is of a universal teenage emotionality. Teenagers, it would seem, are all sensitive, unstable and self-obsessed. Emo is just an expression of what happens to us all in that period of our lives. This is an explanation that fits very easily with popular psychological stereotypes of adolescence, as a period of raging hormones and emotional 'storm and stress'.

Yet it's hard to ignore the air of condescension in this account, written as it is by a thirty-something rock journalist. Like many other commentators, Greenwald explicitly regards this overflowing emotionality as somehow 'real', at least for those involved: it is the very opposite of the irony he identifies (and clearly values) elsewhere in popular culture.

However, I'm not sure we should take these expressions quite so literally. In the accounts I've read, some self-declared emos tend to claim that they were intensely emotional to begin with, and that emo just provided them with a means to express this, and a space to identify with others of their kind (most obviously through social media). Yet there is also a recurring suspicion that others' expressions of emotional distress might be faked or insincere, or at least something of a self-conscious *performance*. To be sure, there are occasional outbursts of emotional turbulence on emo social media, but there is also a considerable amount of banal everyday chat, and a lot of humour – including a persistent strand of self-parody. Here again, we need to beware of taking emo at face value.

Interpreting self-harm

One area in which these paradoxes are most apparent is in relation to self-harm. There's no doubt that self-harm is the explicit focus of at least some emo song lyrics (as in the case of 'Ohio Is For Lovers', quoted above). Emos themselves frequently shared their experiences of self-harm (cutting in particular), not least on social media. And yet much of the commentary about this topic – including among emos themselves – is infused with irony. Jokes like 'I wish my lawn was emo so it would cut itself' were commonly circulated. The claim – frequently made in sensational media coverage – that emo glamourised or encouraged self-harm needs to be treated cautiously.

Self-harm is not uncommon among young people. A 2014 study by Robert Young and others suggests that around 18% of all adolescents self-harm; and while as many as 30% report having suicidal thoughts, 4% actually attempt it. Studies also tend to find that teenagers who strongly identify with subcultures (in general) are also more likely to self-harm, as compared with more 'mainstream' teens. There are problems with how researchers make these categorizations, but there are even bigger difficulties here to do with cause and effect: are more emotionally unstable teenagers more likely to identify with subcultures in the first place, or does associating with a subculture lead them to become unstable?

Some of the psychological literature seems quite ready to leap to the latter conclusion. For example, a South African study by Zdanow and Wright, published in 2012, depicts the 'destructive and dangerous conversations between vulnerable teenagers' taking place on social networking sites, specifically relating to emo. The study argues that self-harming behaviour is normalized, and often idealized or glorified, in such contexts. According to these researchers, teenagers come to these sites in search of a sense of belonging, and in an attempt to overcome their isolation: yet social media works as a form of 'suicide contagion' (in other words, encouraging copycat behaviour), that can be a powerful influence on 'impressionable' adolescents.

However, other researchers are rather more careful. For example, Graham Martin, an Australian psychologist writing in 2006, argues that belonging to a group like emo might just as easily be seen as an outlet for difficult feelings. Others argue that belonging to online discussion groups on such topics might provide support and acceptance, and thereby reduce the likelihood of self-harm, rather than exacerbate it. There is a similar ambivalence in accounts of self-harming behaviour itself. On the one hand, self-harm might be seen as a means of regulating or reducing negative emotions, or overcoming a feeling of 'numbness'; although the display of such behaviour (the parading of scars, for example) might equally serve to mark or reinforce group identity – or even function as a form of attention-seeking. It is also important to differentiate here between self-harm and attempted suicide, which might have quite different motivations – although not all researchers do this.

Ultimately, these studies raise more questions than they answer. Aside from the issue of causality, the problem is that many of them seem to take their data at face value. For example, in a study of 'mental health literacy' published in 2006, two Australian researchers, Scott and Chur-Hansen, interviewed teenage students about

depression and schizophrenia. Unsurprisingly at the time, several of the students chose to talk about emo; and the quotations suggest that they largely denigrated emos as *other* people who would simply follow the trend and cut themselves. None claimed to be emos themselves. While this may tell us something about the persistence of stereotypes, it tells us very little about the influence of youth culture on mental health.

It may well be that expressions of emotional distress and self-harm are more prevalent among groups like emos. To dismiss this behaviour as a kind of simple-minded attempt to appear cool (a form of 'contagion'), or as insincere teenage histrionics, would be a mistake. Yet to ignore the elements of irony and self-parody here would be to take it much too literally.

A crisis of masculinity?

Another dimension of this question of 'feeling' – and another paradox here – is to do with sexuality. Once again, how we interpret this depends upon where we look.

It cannot be denied that emo music was extraordinarily male-dominated, perhaps to an even greater extent than most other popular music genres. In all my viewing of emo videos, I saw not a single female performer; and my expert informants couldn't think of any either. Emo lyrics may not be as overtly misogynist as gangsta rap, for example, but many emo songs are about blaming women for the singer's betrayal and heartbreak, and some are vehicles for fantasies of violent revenge.

And yet emo fashion and style were comparatively androgynous, even by the standards of other youth cultures. Girls and boys wore similar clothing and hairstyles, and boys would sometimes wear make-up. While this wasn't full-on 'gender-bending', there was certainly a degree of gender ambiguity. Furthermore, as we have seen, boys (as well as girls) were encouraged or permitted to be openly emotional, in a way that seems to go against conventional ideas of masculinity. In some contexts, this meant that they ran the risk of being accused of homosexuality: the most frequent abuse of male emos was that they were wimps, sissies, fags or gay. As we shall see, this frequently extended to bullying, and sometimes to overt physical violence.

There were also gay male emos. Writing in 2010, the researcher Brian Peters provides a very upbeat account of 'emo gay boys', arguing that they challenged not just heterosexual, hyper-masculine norms but gay norms as well (what he identifies as the virile, muscular 'Abercrombie and Fitch' look). Peters argues that emos in general encouraged rejection and abuse from the mainstream, on the grounds that this would offer them greater credibility within their alternative cultural world.

However, much of the academic analysis of this issue is much less sympathetic: many commentators have refuted the idea that emo was any kind of challenge to dominant forms of masculinity, or a symptom of a 'crisis of masculinity'. Sam de Boise, for example, points to the 'heteronormative' and 'masochistic' emphasis of emo song lyrics, and argues that they often represent women as vindictive, cruel and manipulative. Women, he argues, are condemned for promiscuity, yet male

competition over women is celebrated. Appearing to be more sensitive and emotional than the average guy doesn't really challenge male privilege. Likewise, music critic Jessica Hopper argues that emo is 'a cathedral of man pain', in which women are merely objects of misery or desire: it is just a 'passive-aggressive rewrite' of traditional rock-and-roll misogyny. According to these critics, emo merely appropriated a few 'feminine' qualities in order to reassert male power more effectively.

Similar arguments have been applied once critics look beyond the music itself. Emily Ryalls, for example, argues that emo boys took on some 'feminine' characteristics, and even performed 'homosexual' acts such as kissing other boys, but this was merely superficial – and mostly served as a means of making themselves more attractive to girls. Self-harm, she argues, was merely a form of exhibitionism, and yet another display of masculine toughness. In a study of young men in South Wales, Michael Ward likewise argues that the outward appearance of 'alternative' forms of masculinity among emos was rather belied by their continuing emphasis on traditional forms of machismo and physical prowess. Being on the receiving end of homophobic abuse and harassment merely enabled these boys to present themselves as 'hero-outsiders'.

This academic trashing of emo pays no attention to female emos, or indeed to female fans of male performers. They seem to be seen implicitly as victims of a kind of false consciousness, buying into a subculture that can only define them as objects of blame and recrimination. Here again, there seems to be an age dimension to these criticisms: these older critics of emo bring to bear the full weight of adult feminist criticism on a phenomenon that is about young teenagers. By exposing the 'true' reactionary motivations that lie behind emos' superficial display of changing gender roles, these authors might be accused of merely reasserting their own power. In my view, they fail to do justice to the ambivalence and confusion that lie at the (bleeding) heart of emo: they take it too seriously, and yet somehow not seriously enough.

Mediating emo

In early 2008, a 13-year-old girl called Hannah Bond hanged herself in her bedroom in Maidstone in the South-east of England. In its reporting, the *Daily Mail* ran a story headlined 'Why no child is safe from the sinister cult of emo'. It wasn't the *Mail*'s first story of this kind: two years earlier, it had provided an 'Emo cult warning for parents', detailing some of the tell-tale signs to look out for. According to the *Mail,* Hannah Bond was a normal, happy teenager until she changed overnight on becoming emo. She had begun self-harming, apparently as part of an 'emo initiation ceremony'; and had chatted online with friends about 'the black parade – a place where emos believe they go after they die'. In the wake of the *Mail* story, a group of fans of Hannah's favourite band My Chemical Romance, featured in the article, organized a protest outside the paper's offices, pointing out several factual errors in its coverage; although the *Mail* responded by claiming that its account was 'balanced and restrained'.

The *Mail* story was perhaps more sensationalist than many others, although examples of this kind of media coverage of emo can be found around the world (I have read accounts from Australia, the USA, Italy, Mexico and Russia). Of course, much of it is exaggerated, confused and inaccurate. In particular, the *Mail* journalists seem unable to identify the elements of parody (and self-parody) that are central to emo. For example, they take literally a YouTube video by what they call the 'band' Adam and Andrew, which is in fact a blatantly absurd parody of emo (and one of many). Their determination to present emo as an 'evil cult' or a 'sect' leads them to misread it in ways that are quite laughable.

On one level, these stories are part of a time-honoured tradition of media misrepresentation. They caricature and stigmatise the subculture, defining it as a threat both to the social and moral order, and to notions of childhood innocence. (It's also interesting to note here that much of the anxiety focuses on *female* emos, rather than their male counterparts – despite the rise in suicide among young men during this period.) This kind of coverage is often seen as evidence of 'moral panic': it plays to 'respectable fears' among polite society, identifies particular 'folk devils' for condemnation, and calls for swift responses from the authorities.

Moral panic theory has been much debated among media scholars, and most would agree that the term is often misused and applied much too readily. It's rare for anxieties about contemporary youth culture to rise to the level of full-blown panic, or to generate official responses, although newspapers like the *Daily Mail* undoubtedly try their best. In this case, however, it appears that the debate did lead to an institutional response, not in the UK but in Russia. The *Guardian* newspaper reported that the Russian government was proposing to outlaw emo music and fashion (along with other unrelated trends) as part of its 'Government Strategy in the Sphere of Spiritual and Ethical Education': in the wake of the Hannah Bond case, it had branded emo a 'social danger' and 'a threat to national stability' – although the moves generated protests from Russian emos.

In the case of emo, the precise focus of such concern – the actual 'folk-devil' – proved quite hard to pin down. In analyzing coverage of a similar set of stories about emo-related suicides in the Australian press, Michelle Phillipov argues that 'emo' was something of a shifting term. While most youth cultures are resistant to being labeled, she argues that this was especially acute in the case of emo – which, as I have noted, was a much more pejorative label than 'Goth' or even 'punk', for example. Few young people would readily identify themselves as 'emo', and many overtly rejected the term. This made it harder for them to challenge the media accounts, although it also made it more difficult for the media to define what emo actually was. As a result, in the stories Phillipov discusses, concerns specifically about emo tended to elide into more generalized anxieties about 'kids today', for example in relation to self-harm, bullying, and unsupervised access to the internet.

Like other contemporary youth cultures, emo was an intensively mediated phenomenon; but the implications of this are complex and sometimes paradoxical. Romantic accounts of youth subcultures tend to present them as movements that emerge spontaneously 'from the streets', only to be caricatured and stigmatized by the mainstream media. Yet, as the researcher Sara Thornton observed many years ago, the media and other cultural industries are involved in the formation of youth

culture from the very start. In her study of 'club cultures', for example, she shows how the mainstream media spread ideas about ravers' music, style and behaviour to a wider audience; while 'insiders' used a range of media – including visual and print media – to promote their activities and share information. Even misrepresentations – as in the case of the Hannah Bond story – can help to bind the culture together, as participants collectively define themselves against outsiders who, it seems, do not understand them. On the other hand, once news of the phenomenon enters the mainstream media, 'alternative' expert commentators (who may or may not identify with the subculture) may be less likely to speak out about it, for fear of losing their authority. This kind of mediation is not new; but with the rise of social media, it has arguably become much more intensive, and more complicated.

Emo online

In the Hannah Bond story, and in other similar accounts, the role of social media was often in the foreground. The emergence of emo during the early 2000s coincided with the rise of social media: emo was perhaps the first subculture of the so-called 'internet generation'. Early platforms like LiveJournal, Friendster and (especially) MySpace were crucial to its global spread. Meanwhile, as we have seen, fears about the harmful influence of emo – and particularly about self-harm – were tied up (and sometimes confused) with emerging anxieties about internet risk. Emo, it seemed, was something teenagers could 'catch' without even leaving the house.

Of course, the internet served several commercial functions for emo. It was a marketing tool for record labels and music venues, and for companies selling emo merchandise and clothing. It made it much easier for bands to build a following, and for performers to connect with their fans. These functions were particularly important given the age group: most followers of emo music would have had fewer opportunities for attend live gigs than fans of other music genres.

However, the internet also provided spaces for emos themselves to interact with each other, especially across large distances, in ways that were much more difficult for earlier youth cultures. Here again, there are questions about how we interpret this phenomenon. The rock journalist Andy Greenwald argues that social media gave emos a wider sense of community, enabling them to overcome isolation and to escape from bullying and abuse (as in the quotation above). Personal blogging platforms like LiveJournal offered them a space to invent and express themselves, and to create new identities. Greenwald offers many examples of what seem like intense, poetic online confessions of 'difficult' emotions – and especially of self-doubt and self-hatred. The emphasis, he argues, is on emotional honesty and sincerity. On this account, the personal blog is a kind of extension of the teenage diary, albeit one that is publically shared: it is an expression of the authentic, inner self – as opposed to the fake self that is seemingly required by the external social world.

At first glance, this seems a long way from the calculated self-presentation (and indeed the competitive self-promotion) that many now associate with platforms like Facebook. Yet some research studies suggest that participants in emo blogging sites and forums were also quite strategic in how they presented themselves. An Italian study of emos using the Netlog platform found that participants were keen to

establish their own authority, as being 'in the know' and authentic. This was often achieved by disparaging members of other subcultures, or indeed pretenders within emo itself: these other people were stigmatised as merely superficial consumerists or posers. In the process, leaders or 'web celebrities' emerged, with the power to police the wider online community.

A very detailed study by two British researchers, Charnoff and Widdicombe, looked at how those seeking to join one such forum (EmoCorner) began by describing themselves. On the one hand, they were keen to establish their credentials by displaying their knowledge of emo-related issues, or asserting their emo characteristics (of appearance, taste or personality) – while simultaneously denying the implication that they were simply followers of fashion. Yet on the other hand, they tended to claim that they had joined the forum because they were 'bored', or for relatively mundane reasons such as wanting to 'make friends' or 'hang out': in doing so, it was as though they wanted to negotiate away any potential criticisms of the emo identity, even in this apparently welcoming (although nevertheless public) context. As this implies, there are often tensions between the desire to affiliate or identify with the group and the desire to assert one's independence and individuality – tensions that cannot easily be resolved.

All this suggests that social media is by no means a neutral space for self-expression or self-disclosure, even within what might appear to be a relatively defined subcultural group. Despite the fantasies of the *Daily Mail*, 'becoming emo' wasn't an easy, overnight transformation. Like other subcultures, emo wasn't a club with card-carrying members that you could easily join. On the contrary, being emo was primarily a *performance*, and one that was more intensively mediated than was the case with earlier youth cultures.

The emo haters

At the same time, this mediated performance took place under an intrusive public gaze. Specialist emo sites and forums were mostly open to access, and after the mid-2000s a great deal of material was posted on public platforms like Facebook and YouTube. While the internet might have enabled isolated young people to build connections with each other, it also exposed them to public ridicule and abuse.

Some of this material seems only gently satirical, and even affectionate. There are numerous YouTube videos with titles like 'Six types of emo kids', 'How emo are you really?' or 'Real emo vs. fake emo', as well as more elaborate parodies like Adam and Andrew's 'Emo kid song' (as featured in the *Daily Mail*), Lars the Emo Kid and the graphic novel series *EmoBoy*. Kelley and Simon's 'guide to emo' book *Everybody Hurts* also contains elements of this, although it provides copious amounts of genuine information – lists of emo music venues, retailers, books and movies – tempered by sarcasm. Phenomena like emo clearly represent a market opportunity, even for their critics.

While some of this material dates back to the mid-2000s, some of it is much more recent in origin. Current YouTube celebrities like Johnnie Guilbert, Eugenia Cooney and Hair Jordan purport to provide fashion tips for aspirant emos – 'Look emo in

minutes', 'How to get emo hair' – and have hundreds of thousands of followers. Several of them are managed by a US agency called Talent Shoppe, and clearly have merchandising deals; although behind them are legions of aspiring online celebrities. It's genuinely hard to tell how much of this material is intended as parody or self-parody, especially given the time that has elapsed since the heyday of emo.

However, some of this online material is more confrontational and disturbing. Youth-oriented wiki sites like *Uncyclopaedia* and *Urban Dictionary* contain extensive amounts of invective directed at emos, some of which is blatantly homophobic. While some of the comments are merely sarcastic, others incite violence against emos, or urge emos to kill themselves in various graphically described ways. In one sequence of YouTube videos entitled 'Emo crybaby whine of surrender', a 15-year-old girl calling herself Princess Punk responds to numerous 'emo haters' who appear to have harassed her in comments on Facebook and YouTube, and directly via a blizzard of prank phone calls. Some of the comments on these and similar posts are vitriolic: emos are condemned as faggots, ugly bitches and spoilt brats, and advised to hang themselves. Others defend emos from the haters – 'Killing emos is wrong', 'Ten things I hate about haters' – generating yet more condemnation in return. While there are occasional elements of humour here, much of it is distinctly painful; and it's clear that this kind of abuse extends offline as well.

In some situations, violence against emos appears to have taken a more organized public form. In Mexico City in 2008, emos were brutally attacked on the streets by groups of older punks and Goths. The attackers were partly motivated by homophobia – emos were criticized for their feminised appearance – but there was also a significant political dimension: emo was condemned as a fake subculture, as a betrayal of the politics of punk, and as middle-class and consumerist. Of course, this kind of confrontation is by no means new – the dimension of class conflict is reminiscent of the violence between hippies and skinheads in the 1970s – but it does clearly indicate that tensions between different youth cultural 'tribes' can be more than simply disagreements about hairstyles.

Conclusion: disavowing emo

Ultimately, it is hard to know how seriously we should take emo – or indeed how seriously emos took themselves. Throughout this piece, I have identified many elements of mockery and parody, deriving not only from outside the culture, but from within it as well. Many 'emos' were uneasy about identifying themselves as such: far from being a proud assertion of identity, it was a label that was often disavowed and resisted, or at least seen with considerable ambivalence.

There are several reasons for this. Clearly, it was partly a response to the bullying and vilification carried out by the 'emo-haters': self-parody or irony might seem to offer a limited form of self-protection from criticism. It was also – as in the uncertainties of some of the online communication – a broader resistance to labelling of any kind. On the one hand, young people (and not only young people) may seek the security of belonging to a group, and yet they do not want to be regarded as mere followers of the crowd, or superficial slaves to fashion. However, as I have noted, the label 'emo' was pejorative from the outset. The 'emo kid' was,

by definition, inauthentic and immature – merely a pretender, a poser. The label was a kind of stigma, which could only be accepted and used with great ambivalence, especially when communicating with outsiders.

It is hard to say whether emo was any more or less fabricated or authentic than any of the other youth subcultures that preceded it. However, I would argue that it was more intensively mediated, both within the wider culture and among emos themselves. This gave it an air of self-consciousness, or perhaps self-awareness, that made it both easy to identify, yet also very difficult to pin down.

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Readers might also be interested in this piece about a parallel youth subculture, skateboarding, which can be downloaded from my Academia site here: https://www.academia.edu/679738/Skate_perception_self-representation_identity_and_visual_style_in_a_youth_subculture.

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