

The Online Community of the Emo Fandom

How a Genre Became a Lifestyle

by

Anna Katherine Williams

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Christi Jay Wells, Chair  
Kay Norton  
Peter Schmelz

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## ABSTRACT

In the early 2000s, a new genre of music broke into the mainstream and began dominating popular music charts. The fans called it emo, and it became known as the latest iteration of the emo genre from the '80s and '90s. In this thesis, I explore the relationship between fans and emo music, clarifying the genre's variety of definitions and interpretations while also identifying the types of discourse and the "productive" fandom practices in which fans participate in online emo community. I consider how early online fandom communities were formed and examine various online emo communities as digital archives containing emo discourse, emo fan fiction, and fan-written music reviews. Analyzing such archived materials from internet sites such as Pinterest, Tumblr, and LiveJournal is an important next step in emo fandom studies because these digital archives reveal significant areas of discourse within emo communities ranging from terminology and genre classification to modes of participatory fandom like fan fiction to conversations about mental health. I consider these topics from all sides, balancing fan testimonies with media narratives and scholarly commentary. By focusing on the mental health crisis in online emo fandom, the fan content that emo fandom inspires, and different approaches to defining the genre of emo, this thesis contributes to the study of a unique musical subculture that shaped the lives of a generation of teenagers. It will also illuminate the essential role that the internet plays in the formation of subcultures and teen identities by exploring the past and present existence of this online fandom.

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## CHAPTER 1

### “THX FR TH MMRS”: AN INTRODUCTION

“It’s not just a phase” was the iconic phrase uttered by my emo peers in middle and high school. As a sophomore in college, I went to see Panic! At The Disco perform in Birmingham, Alabama with my friends. The experience was incredible and intense, but afterwards I realized that for many of my peers, this was a throwback event. They attended the concert to reminisce about middle and high school rather than to hear music they still actively listened to and enjoyed. Emo was something they outgrew. It was “just a phase.” I felt childish and self-conscious for still loving this music that my peers had put behind them. With the onset of Spotify Wrapped (then called “Year in Music”) in 2015, having “good taste” in music became a sort of status symbol. So, I stopped listening to music except for what was necessary for my viola and orchestra repertoire or whatever came on the radio in my car. I also stopped interacting with emo fandom online and found other interests. However, when I began my graduate studies in musicology, I decided to write a term paper about the mainstream emo music of the early 2000s since it was once something I once loved. While writing, I listened to a random emo playlist on Spotify, and the song “Holiday” (2004) by Green Day played. I turned it up loud and danced my heart out, feeling intense waves of nostalgia but also genuine enjoyment and appreciation for this music. Then, when I heard the song “Backseat Serenade” (2012) by All Time Low for the first time in years, I knew that I had not outgrown this music and that it still means as much to me now as it did years ago. With age came the confidence to allow myself to enjoy the music I love regardless of its popularity, and I have been much happier for it. The internet has also shown me that I am not alone in this and that there is

a whole community of people who still love emo. Now I can confidently say “mom, it was never a phase. It’s a lifestyle.”<sup>1</sup>

Because of my background as a participant in emo fandom, I have chosen not to remove myself from this research but rather to draw on my own experiences and use participant observation and autoethnography to paint a more complete picture of the online communities I am analyzing here. In his 2002 monograph, *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills coined the term “aca-fan,” meaning an academic who also participates in a fandom.<sup>2</sup> Because I am not simply an outside researcher observing online emo fandom, I identify myself as an aca-fan. Despite having taken a break from this fandom since reaching adulthood, the experiences from my teenage years gave me a foundation and allow me to have a deeper understanding of the community than I could possibly have as a newcomer. I have spent this past year re-immersing myself in emo fandom communities, mostly on Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram. While I titled this thesis “The Online Community of the Emo Fandom” and I often use this type of language referring to an entire subculture as “the community,” it is really an umbrella that has a variety of small emo communities within it. Each different website functions as its own distinct space within the community, creating multiple emo communities. Upon my re-entering a few of these communities, the first thing I noticed was that many of the same posts I saw ten years ago

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<sup>1</sup> j, (@yungricepatty), 2020, “in search of punk pop tiktok,” TikTok, December 14, 2020, <https://www.tiktok.com/@yungricepatty/video/6906285501372828933> In this video, @yungricepatty yells the quote “mom, it was never a phase. It’s a lifestyle” and then sings the iconic 2007 emo song “Dear Maria, Count Me In” by All Time Low. This video went viral and quickly became a TikTok trend. It caused Alex Gaskarth, lead singer of All Time Low to tweet jokingly: “I always knew Dear Maria would be a massive TikTok song when we wrote it in 2006,” Alex Gaskarth (@AlexGaskarth), Twitter, January 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AlexGaskarth/status/1349492560188719105?s=20&trvMkaWNlwjHp0JR20ig6Yw>.

This TikTok trend caused “Dear Maria, Count Me In” to be certified 2x platinum in 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 20.

are still circulating as the next generation of emo fans adds their own commentary, much of which bears an uncanny similarity to the discourse of my peers from years ago.<sup>3</sup> My impression has been that this fandom is somewhat stuck in the past. Of course, there are a handful of new bands such as Neck Deep, Waterparks, and 5 Seconds of Summer. In addition, many of the emo bands from the early 2000s such as All Time Low, Simple Plan, and Dashboard Confessional are still together and making new music, but despite the availability of new material, the songs and the people that were at the center of the fandom in 2010 are still at the center in 2022. Even those bands who have completely changed their sound and have labeled themselves as a different genre are still included in emo fandom—almost as if they are part of some special emo alumni club. I have noticed that emo fans tend to form strong connections to the people behind the music, meaning that they will consume any media created by those people even if that media falls far outside of emo culture. This includes podcasts, side bands, and even TV shows such as Gerard Way’s *Umbrella Academy* (2019) based on his comic book series.

My research here is a part of a larger movement in academia towards utilizing social media platforms as digital archives of everyday events. This research explores ways of discovering fan content, approximating dates of said content, and identifying key

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<sup>3</sup> A notable difference between modern online emo fandom and the online fandom of my generation that could be the topic of future research is that today’s fans are much quicker to call out bad behavior from the bands. Whereas my generation was the product of an oversexualized music scene, throwing their bras onstage and asking band members to sign their breasts, today’s emo fans in the online communities I have observed are the product of a generation that is coming of age during the #MeToo movement. As a whole, they have a more narrow definition of what acceptable behavior from men in power looks like, and they are quick to address problematic behavior. They can perhaps be overzealous in this and sometimes fail to distinguish between inappropriate comments/behavior and actual sexual harassment or assault. For an example of this, see Doe 3 in Nancy Dillon, “All Time Low Sues To ‘Prove Sex Abuse Allegations are ‘False,’” *Rolling Stone*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/all-time-low-jack-barakat-file-libel-lawsuit-sex-abuse-claims-1294393/>.



discourse. The examples I have cited here are only a small sampling of the fan content and discourse that can be found in these communities, and archiving materials from sites like Pinterest, Tumblr, and LiveJournal is an important next step in emo fandom studies. Viola Lasmana writes that the “21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a burgeoning of various kinds of archives—personal, community, institutional, and hybrid—facilitated by the affordances of digital technology.”<sup>4</sup> As technology develops, the understanding of what an archive is develops with it. However, as is often the case with any type of archival work, the internet leaves gaps and important information is often lost. A major obstacle in this research has been accessing the exact content that was available during the peak of the emo “movement” so to speak. I identify this peak as the time period between 2001 and 2010, although there were certainly influential emo groups before this, and many have also come after it. What I have noticed in perusing fan communities is that once fans reach adulthood and begin to engage in other interests, they either delete their fan profiles or they “scrub” them, meaning that they delete anything they find to be embarrassing or inconsistent with the person they have become. The fleeting nature of posts on these sites is a major obstacle to understanding fandom subcultures. However, a significant number of fan posts that originated on sites such as LiveJournal or Tumblr were captured by screenshots and shared on Instagram or Pinterest when those platforms became popular. In this research, I am using Pinterest and Instagram as the digital archives of the emo community. While this practice may be new in academia, fans have been informally archiving fandom material since the beginning of the internet in order to enact what

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<sup>4</sup> Viola Lasmana, *Media and the Archive: Motions and Transformations*, (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2017) Introduction.

cultural scholar Judith May Fathallah describes as “the construction of new cultural institutions of memory...[and to] protect and sustain female and queer communities and cultures.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the screenshots shared to platforms like Pinterest and Instagram rarely include dates, and Pinterest does not make dates visible to the public. As a result, I have taken several approaches to dating this information. When a post on Pinterest has comments, they are marked by the number of years ago the comment was made. I find the oldest comment and cite the date of the post as “circa” the year that comment was made. If there are no comments on the post, I use Pinterest’s built-in image search tool to try to locate another version of the screenshot that might have comments. If I cannot locate a post with comments, I either cite it as “n.d.” (no date) or I look for helpful context clues. Because of my role as an aca-fan, I am able to use context clues that researchers without inside knowledge of the emo fandom would easily overlook. For instance, I can look at a picture of emo band members and confidently estimate the rough date the picture was taken based on their hairstyles. Other insider information that can help me determine a date includes band members’ tattoos, mentions of specific songs or albums, references to specific events in a band’s history, band personnel, inside jokes, memes, logos, font choices, or the appearance of a specific social media platform in a screenshot. Some of this information can be found not only in the content itself, but also in the screennames (URLs) if the screenshot was taken from Tumblr. As an example, the URL @killjoys-and-stuff reveals to me that this user is a fan of My Chemical Romance because “Killjoys” is the name that My Chemical Romance fans use to identify

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<sup>5</sup> Judith May Fathallah, *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), 10.

themselves. It also tells me that this post was made after 2010 because the name “Killjoys” comes from the band’s 2010 concept album *Danger Days: The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys*. Similarly, I know that any post by @petehiatuswentz was made after 2009 because the URL is a reference to the fact that Pete Wentz’s band Fall Out Boy went on a hiatus in 2009. Because Tumblr is known for its cross-fandom environment, many URLs reference other fandoms that are popular on the platform such as YouTubers Dan and Phil and TV shows like *Doctor Who*, *Supernatural*, and *Sherlock*. My knowledge of these fandoms allows me to use the same process I described above to narrow down dates by looking for references in a user’s URL. If it happens to be the case that the Tumblr blog still exists but has been scrubbed of old content, I can determine that the post of which I have a screenshot was created before the date of their oldest post. One final element I consider when analyzing a Tumblr URL is its complexity. Because each URL must be unique (just like e-mail addresses), the longer Tumblr is around and gathering more users, the fewer options each user has for their URL. If I see a URL that is just a name like @petewentz, that tells me that the account was probably made very close to Tumblr’s creation in 2007. While this does not help me narrow down the date of a post, it does give a bit of insight into the approximate age of the user, which can be valuable information.

At the time of writing, there are only two comprehensive books dedicated to emo music. The most recent is *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture* (2020) by Judith Fathallah, a media and culture scholar from Solent University. This book appeared seventeen years after the first emo book, which was *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* (2003) by Andy Greenwald, a fan himself and a journalist from *Spin*

who has also written for *The Village Voice* and *The Washington Post*. Both of these books present the challenges of defining emo, introduce the significance of online community and fandom, and reflect on youth subcultures. However, both books leave something to be desired when it comes to understanding the sonic elements of emo music.

In her book, Fathallah dives into how emo was established as a subculture and the role the internet played. She covers early emo fandom but then shifts her attention to the YouTube and Tumblr era of emo. She navigates the difficulty of defining emo music by taking a very inclusive approach to its definition. She does this by tracing a clear lineage from the “original” emo music of the 1980s to the music that reached the mainstream in the early 2000s.<sup>6</sup> Her historical and genealogical approach to defining emo provides a framework that I utilize in striking a balance between the technical musical definition and the all-inclusive “fangirl” definition. What I considerer to be the “fangirl” definition is one entirely based on aesthetics rather than musical sounds with the only musical requirement being that it is some type of rock or alternative; whereas, a strictly musical definition is more discerning as to the nuances that create subgenres within those two genres. The biggest contribution Fathallah makes to the field is her analysis of the role gender plays in emo fandom. Drawing on scholars such as Emily Ryalls, Sam de Boise, Susan McClary, Simon Frith, and Angela McRobbie, Fathallah addresses gatekeeping, misogyny, representation, gender norms, and masculinity by examining both the musical genre itself and the communities it inspires. I apply her work to my own reflections on

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<sup>6</sup> Fathallah, *Emo*, 26.

how female fans participate in emo fandom and expand it to include queer fans of a range of genders.

Much of the emo music literature focuses on the genre and its fandom's gender dynamics, gender norms, and sexuality. Katie Fielding's 2019 article for *Melisma Magazine*, "Misogyny in Emo," reports instances of emo musicians abusing their power and sexually harassing or taking advantage of their young female fans. Fielding reflects on how this is not isolated to emo music, but she argues that the fact that the emo genre is male-dominated on the stage with a primarily female fanbase exacerbates the issue. She also believes that the lyrical content's ubiquitous trope of heartbreak at the hands of women creates a "narrow and absurd worldview" where women are the sole cause of emotional turmoil.<sup>7</sup> This idea of women being responsible for all of emo men's suffering is reiterated by Emily Ryalls in her essay "Emo Angst, Masochism, and Masculinity in Crisis." Ryalls describes the emo subculture as a "white male utopia" and argues that even though emo allows the pushing of heteronormative masculinity's boundaries, it only does this to "serve heteronormative ends."<sup>8</sup> Brian M. Peters has a slightly different interpretation of the emo subculture. He writes in his article "Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of Masculinity" that the queer fandom actually subverts these heteronormative ends and that alternative subcultures are important for gay youth who do not feel they fit into the traditional gay

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<sup>7</sup> Katie Fielding, "Misogyny in Emo," *Melisma Magazine*, June 3, 2019, <https://melismamagazine.com/2018/06/28/misogyny-in-emo/>.

<sup>8</sup> Emily Ryalls, "Emo Angst, Masochism, and Masculinity in Crisis," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2013): 88, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10462937.2013.764570>.

stereotypes.<sup>9</sup> While they are but one aspect of this unique genre and subculture, interrogating dynamics of gender and sexuality is crucial to understanding the music and the culture of emo. These sources form a framework grounded in gender and sexuality through which I will examine other elements of emo that have to this point been overlooked. This framework will inform the way I approach definitions of emo itself as I highlight the gender differences that correspond to various definitions. Considering gender dynamics will also influence my understanding of how fans (primarily female) relate to the artists (primarily male), and a queer lens will give insight into the realm of fan-made content, particularly fan fiction, and the search for identity that is central to emo.

Greenwald's *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* has garnered a good deal of criticism spending too much time on one particular band—Dashboard Confessional—and ignoring the other artists and sounds that fall under the emo umbrella. Fathallah also finds fault with Greenwald's often contradictory explanations of what emo is. In one moment, Greenwald is claiming that emo is impossible to define and then in the next moment he presents a specific and sophisticated definition. At one point, he suggests that emo is not even a genre but rather a relationship between fans and their favorite bands.<sup>10</sup> He presents the questions and debates that surround the definition of emo but neither answers them nor provides solutions. However, *Nothing Feels Good* does make a significant contribution to the field, especially considering that it was one of the only

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<sup>9</sup> Brian M. Peters, "Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of Masculinity," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7, no. 2 (2010): 129–146, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19361651003799817?src=recsys>.

<sup>10</sup> Andy Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 4.

books about emo music for more than a decade. In researching this book, Greenwald was able to draw on his past experiences as a journalist working closely with artists like Jim Adkins of Jimmy Eat World and Chris Carrabba of Dashboard Confessional. He also has an incredible amount of personal testimonies that he gathered from attending concerts where emo fans were delighted to have someone interested in hearing about their love of emo music. Another incredibly valuable element of Greenwald's book is his "Part Four: Lost & Found In Diaryland" where he dives into "messageboard culture." This section is full of first-hand accounts from young people active in online emo community and some direct screenshots of the posts and discourse that could be found online. These are immensely useful to me since navigating the WayBack Machine to find material from 2003 is difficult at best.<sup>11</sup> Greenwald offers a direct glance into the type of content and discussion that was available on Makeoutclub and LiveJournal when those platforms were at their most popular.

Over the past twenty years, a handful of scholars have written about the online community of emo, but the majority of this literature is more data-driven and focuses less on personal narratives. By conducting studies and surveys to compile data directly from online emo communities, these researchers have identified key areas of discourse within the fandom as well as common beliefs or traits among emo fans. Key areas of discourse include oversharing, authenticity, and self-harm. In his 2003 *New York Times* article "The Emo Diaries: No Wonder the Band is Called Confessional," Jon Carmanica gives

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<sup>11</sup> The Wayback Machine is an internet archiving project that allows one to visit a particular website and view it the way it would have appeared to a user on a given day in internet history. It allows users to track the history of a website throughout its years of existence. While this is an incredibly useful tool, the trouble is that not all websites are archived for specific dates and often none of the links on the website work since only the homepage of the specific website in question may have been documented.

statistics of LiveJournal users by age and draws a connection between the emotional nature of emo music and the way LiveJournal emo fans pour out their hearts online.<sup>12</sup> They are not necessarily pouring their hearts out about their love for emo music, but rather they are following the examples set by emo musicians to “overshare” about their own personal lives and conflicts. When investigating why teenagers participate in online emo communities, Nathalie Chernoff and Sue Widdicombe discovered that few teenagers claim that they intentionally chose to join because they were looking for emo community. The top cited reason for joining was actually boredom, and “posters claimed the legitimacy of belonging while discounting emo as their reason for joining.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, the discourse of the emo community Chernoff and Widdicombe examined was primarily centered around the personal lives of its members and their claims of authenticity. Dressing a certain way or listening to a certain band just because they were emo was considered inauthentic. Authentic emos dressed the way they wanted to and listened to the music they liked, and that is what made them emo rather than the other way around. The sharing of information about their personal lives led to depression and self-harm becoming major topics within this community. This has also been observed by other scholars such as Carla Zdanow and Bianca Wright. Their study “The Representation of Self Injury and Suicide on Emo Social Networking Groups” examines the posts of emo teenagers on Facebook, and their results were that these fandom communities are toxic and often promote and glorify self-harm. They found that cutting was a rite of passage

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<sup>12</sup> Jon Caramanica, "The Emo Diaries: No Wonder the Band is Called Confessional," *New York Times*, (Aug 10, 2003), <http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/docview/432475126?accountid=4485>.

<sup>13</sup> Nathalie Chernoff and Sue Widdicombe, “‘I Was Bored so...’: Motivational Accounts of Participation in an Online Emo Group,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 313.



that fans bragged about in their posts.<sup>14</sup> Ariela Mortara and Simona Ironico confirm this, identifying cutting as an “emo ritual.”<sup>15</sup>

Studies conducted within online emo communities also revealed common beliefs or traits among emo fans. Noah Allooh, Christina Rummell, and Ronald Levant reported that emo fans in general “do not endorse the traditional masculine norm of restrictive emotionality.”<sup>16</sup> The rejection of this masculine norm coincided with a rejection of other masculine norms such as “avoidance of femininity and dominance.”<sup>17</sup> There is overlap in the rejection of gender norms among emo fans and among the queer community. This phenomenon may explain how the online emo fandom came to be primarily run by queer fans. Another shared trait among emo fans was discovered by Mortara and Ironico who conducted a study and published “Deconstructing Emo Lifestyle and Aesthetics: A Netnographic Research” about the role of re-appropriating emo fandom material to construct identity. Their netnographic approach was chosen as the best way to analyze an entire community, and it revealed several key aspects of emo identity that fans pieced together using fan-made content.<sup>18</sup> Their self-constructed identities are centered around “depression and a feeling of abandonment that [they] feel inside,” which corresponds with the discourse around depression central to online emo community.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Carla Zdanow and Bianca Wright, "The Representation of Self Injury and Suicide on Emo Social Networking Groups," *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine De Sociologie* 16, no. 2 (2012): 81-101, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/afisocirevi.16.2.81>.

<sup>15</sup> Ariela Mortara and Simona Ironico, “Deconstructing Emo Lifestyle and Aesthetics: a Netnographic Research,” *Young Consumers* 14, no. 4 (2013): 358.

<sup>16</sup> Noah N. Allooh, Christina M Rummell, and Ronald F Levant, “‘Emo’ Culture And Gender Norms In Late Adolescents And Young Adults,” *Thymos* (Harriman, Tenn.) 7, no. 1 (2013): 39-40.

<sup>17</sup> Allooh, Rummell, and Levant, “‘Emo’ Culture and Gender Norms,” 40.

<sup>18</sup> Mortara and Ironico, “Deconstructing Emo Lifestyle and Aesthetics,” 353.

<sup>19</sup> Mortara and Ironico, “Deconstructing Emo Lifestyle and Aesthetics,” 355.

For a topic that is characterized by the truncation of the word “emotional,” data-driven research cannot fully capture what online community is, why fans participate in it, and what they get out of it. The studies discussed above all functioned by collecting a large amount of information and then forming generalizations and identifying common threads, which inevitably leaves holes, especially considering how the community seems to have different meanings for different fans. I intend to use the data provided by these articles to identify the questions that linger around this topic such as what about emo do so many teenagers find compelling; what does fandom mean to fans; why does a straight, cis, male-dominated genre attract so many female and queer fans; why do so many emo fans have mental illnesses; and what kinds of things do emo fans talk about and connect over?

Because of my position as an “aca-fan” I have chosen to refer to the emo musicians here by their first names to be consistent with the way they are referred to in online communities. This builds familiarity with the musicians, which is the goal of fandom. It also will keep the names consistent between fan-made content and my own commentary. This is an approach that has been taken by jazz scholars such as Leonard Feather and Gene Lees who became friends with the musicians about whom they were writing.<sup>20</sup>

In my first chapter, I tell the history of the emo genre and discuss the variety of definitions that fans and scholars have suggested as well as the debates and gatekeeping that accompany them. I also engage with literature about teenage subcultures and

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<sup>20</sup> Leonard Feather, *Inside Jazz* (New York City: J.J. Robbins and Sons, Inc., 1949); Gene Lees, *Friends Along the Way: a Journey through Jazz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

introduce the role that fandom plays in these subcultures. Finally, I reflect on the early days of the internet and how online fandom communities were established, and I look at various online emo communities as digital archives of emo discourse and fan-written music reviews. My second chapter focuses on the concept of “productive fandom” and how fans become creators themselves when the consumption of fandom materials inspires them to create their own media. Here, I address how queer and female fans have worked to make this fandom their own through productive fandom practices in spite of having little to no representation in emo bands. I focus specifically on fan fiction and cover bands. My final chapter reflects on a darker side of the fandom by discussing the mental health issues that run rampant in online emo communities. I consider the content and discourse related to suicide and self-harm in online emo communities, fan stories of band members making a positive difference in their lives, and mainstream media narratives about the danger of emo communities. It is my hope that this research will bring more attention to a unique musical subculture that shaped the lives of many teenagers, myself included, and that it will illuminate the essential role the internet plays in the formation of subcultures and teen identity.

## CHAPTER 2

### "ALL THE SMALL THINGS": DEFINING RITES OF SPRING TO BLINK-182

#### HISTORY

The term “emo” emerged in the 1980s in Washington, D.C. as a shortened version of “emotional hardcore.” It was a subgenre of hardcore punk that focused more on introspection than it did on social issues. The best way to understand emo is to break it down into waves. While some modern music critics identify five waves of emo, the focus of this research is on the first three waves.<sup>21</sup> During the first wave in the ’80s and early ’90s, emo was more of an underground musical movement, and many bands were short-lived, but a handful of these early emo bands made names for themselves, such as Rites of Spring, Minor Threat, Embrace, Jawbreaker, Weezer, and Green Day. Bands of the second wave included Blink-182, Sunny Day Real Estate, American Football, The Promise Ring, Jimmy Eat World, Mineral, and Braid, among others. Blink-182’s 1999 album *Enema of the State* is what truly brought emo into the mainstream.<sup>22</sup> The music these bands created solidified the aesthetic of emo and influenced the sounds of emo’s subsequent waves. Some of them remained in the hardcore and punk tradition while others pioneered the sound that became known as “Midwest emo.” This sound relied heavily on acoustic guitars, and the vocals are often described as whiney or nasally.

The third wave of emo occurred throughout the first decade of the 2000s led by bands such as My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy, Dashboard Confessional, Panic! At

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<sup>21</sup> Adam Feibel, “The New Generation of Emo in Eight Releases,” Bandcamp, May 25, 2021, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/lists/fifth-wave-emo-list>.

<sup>22</sup> Amanda Petrusich, “Reviving the Pop-Punk Innocence of Blink-182,” *The New Yorker*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/reviving-the-pop-punk-innocence-of-blink-182>.

the Disco, Paramore, Evanescence, All Time Low, The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus, and countless others. Many of these bands had their start in the 1990s but only became well known after 2001. Others, like My Chemical Romance, did not form until after 2001. These third wave bands covered a variety of different sounds while all apparently existing within one genre. Bands like Dashboard Confessional and Saves the Day clung to the second-wave's acoustic sounds, while other bands adopted a pop-punk sound with flashy guitars, catchy songs, and pop "hooks." An article in *Rolling Stone* describes pop-punk as "the teen soap opera of contemporary rock."<sup>23</sup> It takes the underground characteristics and ideals of punk and produces them for a mainstream "pop" audience.

#### VARIETY OF DEFINITIONS

With its first three waves all characterized by different sounds, emo music reveals the difficulty of categorizing music into genres. Since the post-World War II rock 'n' roll era of popular music began, it has been constantly growing and shifting to form new genres, and each genre eventually breaks into subgenres and so on. A significant trend in popular music studies that Susan McClary pointed out in *Conventional Wisdom* was the loss of a mainstream.<sup>24</sup> To this idea, Richard Taruskin responded by asking "whatever happened to the word 'stream'?"<sup>25</sup> He believed that types of music had been misidentified as mainstream when in reality there were just lots of streams, and that is

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher R. Weingarten, Leor Galil, Hank Shteamer, et al., "The 50 Greatest Pop-Punk Albums," *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, May 9, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/50-greatest-pop-punk-albums-122677/discount-half-fiction-1997-125314/>.

<sup>24</sup> Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom : the Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 32.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Cook, "Alternative Realities: A Reply to Richard Taruskin," *Nineteenth Century Music* 30, no. 2 (Fall, 2006): 207, ProQuest.

more true than ever today as the popular music streaming platform Spotify currently holds 5,071 “distinct” music genres.<sup>26</sup> None of these genres exist in a vacuum, but rather they all build on what came before them, causing the distinctions between them to become blurry. Because of this, there is no set definition of what emo is. In his book *Nothing Feels Good*, Andy Greenwald writes that “emo seems *solely* to mean different things to different people—like pig latin or books by Thomas Pynchon, confusion is one of its hallmark traits.”<sup>27</sup>

### SONIC DEFINITIONS

As he was writing his book, Greenwald sent out a survey to friends and colleagues to gauge their understanding of the term emo. Some of the responses he got included “frantic, wailing, big-guitar sound,” “emotional and musical rawness,” “poppy punk,” “music charged with emotions,” “bands that write songs about girls and life and stuff,” “punkish music,” and “deep, insightful, and poetic [lyrics].”<sup>28</sup> From these descriptions, it seems lyrical content is as important as musical sound, and considering the variety of emo styles, perhaps the musical sounds only serve to convey the story of the lyrics. This is interesting considering that Simon Frith writes in *The Sociology of Rock* that “a word-based approach is not helpful at getting at the ideology of rock.”<sup>29</sup> He quotes Greil Marcus saying that “words are sounds we can feel before they are

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<sup>26</sup> Ynez Wahab, “9 Music Genres on Spotify You Might Not Have Heard of Before,” *Bandwagon*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.bandwagon.asia/articles/9-eclectic-spotify-genres-you-may-not-have-heard-of-before-wrapped-every-noise-at-once-lowercase-stomp-and-holler-pixie-skwec-catstep-ninja-Solipsynthm-wonky-escape-room-2021>.

<sup>27</sup> Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (Constable, 1979), 176.

statements to understand.”<sup>30</sup> Second-wave emo band Jimmy Eat World claimed that “lyrics aren’t really that important... We have them because we need them. Within the band we never talk about them. I don’t know what the songs mean.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps lyrical content is the area where third-wave emo departs most substantively from earlier waves since third-wave artists speak about their lyrics extensively in interviews, and fan discourse is often centered on the lyrics and their meaning. In the years when artists like Justin Bieber and One Direction were growing in popularity (around 2010-2015), there were fandom feuds on the internet between pop and emo fans. The most common argument emo fans brought up for their own music’s superiority over pop music was the lyrical content.<sup>32</sup>

For their article on reasons that teenagers participate in online emo communities, Chernoff and Widdicombe describe emo as “a particular combination of punk and indie rock which feature[s] lyrics focusing on scorned love, loneliness and depression.”<sup>33</sup>

Allooh, Rummell, and Levant’s definition includes descriptors such as “emotionally expressive,” “depressed or angst-filled,” and “high energy but very grim lyrics.”<sup>34</sup>

According to Daschuk,

The term ‘emo’ arose within Washington, D.C.’s hardcore-punk scene of the mid-1980s...the classification ‘emo-core’ was used to denote bands...that directed lyrical focus to intensely emotional and personal themes, and in so doing strove to

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<sup>30</sup> Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 96.

<sup>32</sup> This was a common occurrence I recall from the first few years of the 2010s. It is not really a comparison that is frequently made today, but there are still a multitude of memes from those days and even interviews where emo band members would criticize pop musicians. An example of a typical meme about this is Emily Marie (@emlor199), Pinterest pin, n.d., Accessed March 17, 2022, <https://pin.it/XAyyQDv>.

<sup>33</sup> Chernoff and Widdicombe, “I Was Bored so...,” 305.

<sup>34</sup> Allooh, Rummell, Levant, “Emo Culture and Gender,” 23.

challenge the doxa of a subcultural field championing blind aggression, a field in which status was reinforced by masculine bravado and violent altercation.<sup>35</sup> This definition presents emo as attempting to strike a balance between the aggression of hardcore and punk and a more sensitive and nuanced expression. The sensitivity can be found in the lyrical content and, according to Rosemary Overall, the melodic line. She writes that

This was a type of melodic punk focused on emotional concerns—crushes, break-ups and make-ups—rather than social issues...In the 1990s, alternative music styles inflected emocore. Emo bands lost much of the punk aesthetic and began including acoustic elements in their songs...[in the 2000s] emo came to signify a particular musical style: melodic punk verses, contrasted with loud, fast choruses, which generally contained a pop-style ‘hook.’<sup>36</sup>

These definitions continue to reinforce the idea that the lyrical content of emo music is as significant as the music. This is consistent with the types of content found in fandom communities. Fanart is often centered around lyrics, and conversations among fans about the music tend to be more centered on words and meaning rather than sounds, although there is still some discourse about types of sounds that fans like. It seems that fans especially like music where the lyrical content and the musical sounds are in dissonance. This was evident during the early sounds of Twenty-One Pilots, when they played “happy” sounding songs on ukulele, piano, and drums while singing lyrics about extreme mental anguish and coming-of-age conflicts. In fact, fans seem to enjoy the difficulty of categorizing their music and often come up with humorous ways of describing it like Tumblr user @soulpxnk who said, “twenty one pilots’ genre is like

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<sup>35</sup> M. Douglas Daschuk, "Messageboard Confessional: Online Discourse and the Production of the ‘Emo Kid,’” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 54 (2010): 92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40999937>.

<sup>36</sup> Rosemary Overall, “Emo Online: Networks of Sociality/networks of Exclusion,” *Perfect Beat* 11, no. 2 (2011): 144.



alternative electro emotional piano rap snap crack tic tac paddy whack gift wrap booby trap shower cap snapback zap tap treasure map ukulele screamo.”<sup>37</sup>

## SUBCULTURAL DEFINITIONS

It was during its third wave that emo became strongly associated with a particular style of dress and makeup. A culture of black, goth-inspired clothing, heavy makeup, and straight hair with choppy layers to intentionally cover the eyes came to define emo. This subcultural movement and style became associated with the emo genre more than any specific style of music. Dick Hebdige notes, “as the music and the various subcultures it supports or reproduces assume rigid and identifiable patterns, so new subcultures are created which demand or produce corresponding mutations in musical form.”<sup>38</sup> The following quotes are various aesthetic and subcultural definitions I have gathered.

Emo music artists and their devoted listeners display distinct fashion styles: wearing predominantly dark colored clothing, heavy eyeliner, tight trousers and dyed hair quaffed to cover one eye.<sup>39</sup>

The Emo subculture, a post-punk movement, develops in the late eighties and is characterized by a do-it-yourself approach (DIY) to production (Horton, 2009), which manifests thorough practices, rituals, gestures, language and aesthetic forms.<sup>40</sup>

Clothing was literally ‘dark,’ with tight black jeans a staple (Simon and Kelley 2007). Further, the association of ‘emotions’ with femininity manifested in emos’ androgynous style. Men and women both wore make-up, particularly heavy eyeliner and styled their hair, using hair-straighteners and hairspray.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> @soulpxnk, Tumblr, “twenty one pilot’s genre,” c. 2011-2014, Quoted in Megan Jewel (@IXBatWomanXI), Pinterest pin, before 2018, Accessed March 3, 2022, <https://pin.it/IT9mJCv>.

<sup>38</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture : the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979) 69.

<sup>39</sup> Chernoff and Widdicombe, “I was Bored so...” 305.

<sup>40</sup> Mortara, and Ironico, “Deconstructing Emo Lifestyle and Aesthetics,” 351.

<sup>41</sup> Overell, “Emo Online,” 145.

Douglas Daschuck attributes the unification of emo's visual and musical aesthetics to the band My Chemical Romance (hereafter referred to as MCR), specifically their 2004 album *Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge*.<sup>42</sup> The aesthetic of MCR during this era was solid black suits with red ties, pale makeup, dark circles under the eyes, heavy eyeliner, messy hair, and fake blood everywhere. It can really be described as a vampire aesthetic, and fans loved it. Even when their 2006 album *Welcome to the Black Parade* came out and MCR changed their aesthetic, the pale makeup and heavy eyeliner remained. Other bands such as Fall Out Boy and Black Veil Brides also wore this look, making it the stereotypical emo look.<sup>43</sup>

Brian M. Peters calls this emo look “emo boy 3” and claims that this was when “emo move[d] from straight to gay” since alternative looks, especially in men, were and still are often coded as gay.<sup>44</sup> The reason for this could be that any look that departed from the heterosexual masculine norm was seen as less masculine and therefore gay. It was common then for kids to use gay as an insult to a person's masculinity, which some kids actually embraced. Peters wrote in 2006 that his students used “emo” and “gay” interchangeably and that “this type of emo is androgynous, insubordinate, and labeled reclusive, and...even seen as depressive and self-destructive.”<sup>45</sup> Peters is not the only scholar to identify the emo aesthetic as androgynous. Fathallah also wrote that “emo today is defined in a space that is, if not feminine, androgynous and queerly gendered much of the time.”<sup>46</sup> The fact that a queer and often feminine aesthetic emerged from a

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<sup>42</sup> Daschuck, “Messageboard Confessional,” 98.

<sup>43</sup> Black Veil Brides still leans into this look heavily in 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Peters, “Emo Gay Boys and Subculture,” 135.

<sup>45</sup> Peters, “Emo Gay Boys and Subculture,” 135.

<sup>46</sup> Fathallah, *Emo*, 31.

music genre dominated by white, straight, cisgender men truly shows how independent the fandom can be from its source material. Theodore Gracyk writes about this idea, claiming that music “will speak to diverse audience, conveying different but related meanings and identities to different groups.”<sup>47</sup> The open-endedness of music is made even more evident by the fact that most “emo” musicians reject that label that fans have projected onto them.

### GATEKEEPING

Online music communities can be especially harsh in defending their chosen definition of the genre. The biggest source of contention among fans is the third-wave of emo music. The older die-hard emo fans reject the pop-punk leanings of third wave emo and cling to the acoustic, DIY sound or the post-hardcore sounds of the past. These fans believe that third-wave emo cannot possibly be considered emo because of how mainstream it was. Part of the appeal of emo to them was the feeling of being a part of the counter-culture. The internet has affectionately nicknamed these emo fans, who are roughly over the age of thirty, as “elder emos.” Elder emos are the fans who formed the first online emo communities on Live Journal and were fans during second-wave emo.

As elder emos have become notorious for their gatekeeping of the genre with rigid definitions and purist attitudes, they have also become known for a cospypasta rant that originated on a Facebook page. A “cospypasta” is an internet rant that is created by one person and copied and pasted by other users over and over to the point that it

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<sup>47</sup> Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me : Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001) 44.

becomes instantly recognizable to internet users within a community. It is often characterized by random words being all capitalized. The emo rant is as follows:

"Real Emo" only consists of the dc Emotional Hardcore scene and the late 90's Screamo scene. What is known by "Midwest Emo" is nothing but Alternative Rock with questionable real emo influence. When people try to argue that bands like My Chemical Romance are not real emo, while saying that Sunny Day Real Estate is, I can't help not to cringe because they are just as fake emo as My Chemical Romance (plus the pretentiousness). Real emo sounds ENERGETIC, POWERFUL and somewhat HATEFUL. Fake emo is weak, self pity and a failed attempt to direct energy and emotion into music. Some examples of REAL EMO are Pg 99, Rites of Spring, Cap n Jazz (the only real emo band from the midwest scene) and Loma Prieta. Some examples of FAKE EMO are American Football, My Chemical Romance and Mineral EMO BELONGS TO HARDCORE NOT TO INDIE, POP PUNK, ALT ROCK OR ANY OTHER MAINSTREAM GENRE<sup>48</sup>

The argument presented in this copypasta is that emo is simply another iteration of hardcore. Considering the bands listed here, the creator of this copypasta and anyone with whom the rant resonates believes that what other scholars and I have defined as first-wave emo is the only emo. It should be noted that the Facebook user who created this rant is male. Additionally, the online community where this rant is most often shared is r/emo on Reddit, which skews male in comparison to emo communities on Tumblr or Instagram.<sup>49</sup> This has led me to make the observation that male emo fans may have a more rigid definition of emo than fans of other genders.

One particular male fan has made his entire career out of gatekeeping this genre. Tom Mullen is a passionate emo fan who has created a multitude of resources regarding emo music including his website WashedUp, a podcast, Anthology of Emo,

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<sup>48</sup> Memelords against furrries and fake emo, Facebook, January 7, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/NotFakeEmo>.

<sup>49</sup> William Sattelberg, "The Demographics of Reddit: Who Uses the Site?" Alphr, April 6, 2021, <https://www.alphr.com/demographics-reddit/>.

and [isthisbandemo.com](http://isthisbandemo.com). “Is this band emo?” allows users to type in the name of any band to find out if it is emo or not.<sup>50</sup> After spending time typing in many band names to find out exactly how Mullen defines emo, I have determined that he draws a very strong line excluding pop-punk and only considers the soundscapes of the first and second waves to truly be emo. Now considering how many different genre labels have been used to describe third-wave emo, perhaps Mullen’s purist attitude towards emo and the copy-paste rant are technically accurate, and third-wave emo should not be called emo. However, this is not quite consistent with the spirit of emo. The heart of emo as identified in the 1980s is emotion and introspection, so whether an artist is screaming about their feelings or calmly lyricizing with a guitar, it is all emo.

Considering the emotional nature of emo music, it is no wonder that fans can become so heated in arguing about what is and isn’t emo. The target audience of third-wave emo was teenagers, and one of the most important aspects of art is the interaction between creators and fans. In reality, what fans consider “emo” is the amalgamation of emo, punk rock, hardcore, alt rock, pop-punk, screamo, post-hardcore, hard rock, pop rock, and other similar genres. All music draws influence from somewhere, and punk and hardcore created the foundation for emo and all of the other genres that can fall under that umbrella. When analyzing the music itself, perhaps it is more useful to call third-wave emo music by its most literal genre label, but from a subcultural perspective, it is important to recognize that the fans of all of the genres listed above identify collectively as emo. I recently attended a DJ event that tours across the country called “Emo Night

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<sup>50</sup> Tom Mullen, “Is This Band Emo?” Is This Band Emo, Accessed March 1, 2022, <http://isthisbandemo.com>.

Brooklyn.” Although the event is called emo and all of the branding uses the word emo, at the beginning of his set, the DJ asked the crowd who was there to hear hardcore, who was there to hear Midwest emo, who was there to hear pop-punk, etc., demonstrating how the fandom understands all of the genre distinctions but yet still identifies it all as emo. Fathallah writes that “regardless of the empirical validity” of gatekeeper’s arguments, there is a “history and genealogy for emo usually tracing a direct line from Rites of Spring to Thursday to MCR, simultaneously to FOB then through to Panic!”<sup>51</sup> For the remainder of this thesis, I will refer to all of this music exclusively as “emo” and to the subculture as “emo,” “the fandom,” or “the scene.” I have created a simplified flowchart of many of the genres that are frequently referred to as “emo” and how they all relate to each other. There are a multitude of nuances to take into consideration when analyzing the genres that fit under the emo umbrella, and this is only one interpretation of how some of these genres fit together.

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<sup>51</sup> Fathallah, *Emo*, 26.

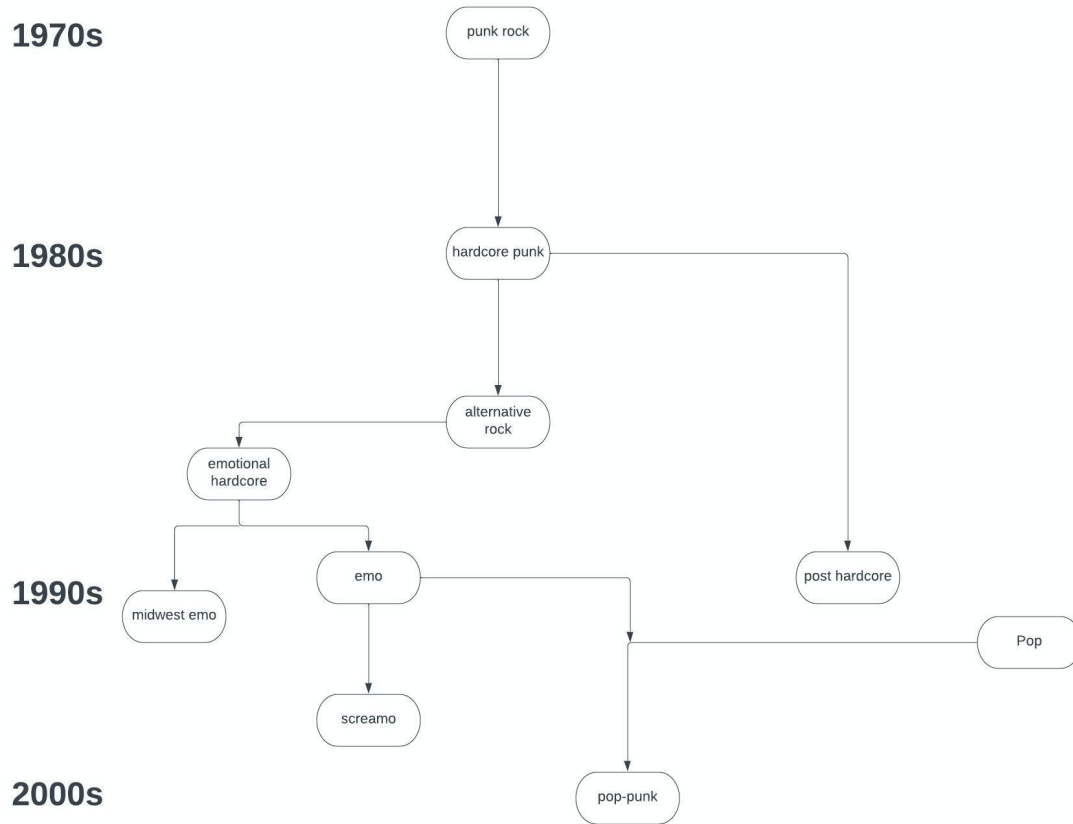


Figure 1.1 Flowchart of a handful of genres that can be considered emo and how they fit together. Produced by the author.

## TEENAGE SUBCULTURES

In the *Sociology of Rock*, Frith emphasizes the fact that the sociology of rock is inseparable from the sociology of youth as “rock is the music of youth.”<sup>52</sup> In fact, a 1961 survey revealed that music was the most popular form of entertainment among young people in America.<sup>53</sup> After World War II, popular music was marketed towards what was a distinct new demographic: teenagers.<sup>54</sup> They were seen as a leisure group, and it was

<sup>52</sup> Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> Jon Savage, *Teenage: the Creation of Youth Culture* (New York: Viking, 2007), xv.

assumed that “consumption determined identity [and] style determined behavior.”<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps this is in some ways true, considering that teenagers are constantly in search of identity and spend their formative years testing new identities trying to find something that feels authentic to them. Frith writes that “teenage styles reflect the need of all adolescents to ‘belong.’”<sup>56</sup> It is no surprise that they would be drawn to music that “expresses...the universal doubts and uncertainties of adolescence.”<sup>57</sup> Amanda Petrusich writes that pop-punk (a main descriptor of third-wave emo) lives in the longing and self-doubt of adolescence with its “rawness” being “not in the music but in the heady newness of those feelings.”<sup>58</sup>

This testing of new identities also leads to a search for peer-groups with shared experiences. Allison McCracken writes that teenagers join the social media platform Tumblr in order to find a peer-group.<sup>59</sup> Social media platforms offer a way to do this while also maintaining privacy. Tumblr users typically use cute or funny pseudonyms that keep their identity private from parents and other people who know them “irl” (in real life), but the platform is public so that they can easily find users who have similar interests.<sup>60</sup> McCracken explains that “teens’ use of social media is a reflection of their need to find new ways to achieve privacy and assert some control over their personal space.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, 21.

<sup>56</sup> Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, 47.

<sup>57</sup> Frith, *The Sociology of Rock*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Petrusich, “Reviving the Pop-Punk Innocence of Blink-182.”

<sup>59</sup> Allison McCracken, “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement,” *Cinema Journal* 57, 1 (2017): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061>.

<sup>60</sup> In fact, from my own experience, it is a sign of trust and deep friendship to share your Tumblr username with someone you know in real life.

<sup>61</sup> McCracken, “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement,” 153.



## FANDOM

One of the most significant ways in which teenagers relate to their peer-groups is through fandom, whether it is fandom of a book or comic book series, TV show, movie franchise, video game, or band. Fandom scholar Nicolle Lamerichs identifies these objects of fandom as “core text.”<sup>62</sup> Frith believes that teenage culture is best described nonverbally with music, dancing, clothing, slang, aesthetics, etc., and fandom encapsulates all of these elements.<sup>63</sup> He writes:

There is a strong impulse at this age to identify with these collective representations and to use them as guiding fictions. Such symbolic fictions are the folklore by means of which teenagers, in part, shape and compose their mental picture of the world. It is in this identification that we find an explanation for the behavior of the teenage "fan" and the contrived absurdities of the fan club, with its sacred relics, ritual strippings of the "hero," and personally autographed images.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps from the outside fandom, such devotion may appear to be a silly obsession, but it is really a “way of making sense of the world through felt and shared experiences.”<sup>65</sup> It creates a community based on shared interests and passions, and it allows that community to flourish in whatever way necessary, whether that is providing a platform for teens to share their frustrations about their lives or to give them material that will distract them from their problems.

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<sup>62</sup> Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 154.

<sup>63</sup> Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 32.

<sup>64</sup> Frith and Goodwin, *On Record*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 19.

## THE INTERNET

Greenwald quotes Saves The Day's manager Rich Egan in saying, "the internet has completely changed and affected every single possible facet of this business and of the subculture in general" by making information about bands readily available across the country and thus moving the genre away from its underground roots.<sup>66</sup> In order to better illustrate the rapid growth of the internet and its reach, I have created a timeline of the relevant history of the internet spanning from the year 1990 through 2011. On the right side, I have listed the internet platforms and websites that relate to the discussion of online fandom by the year they were created. On the left side, I use data from ourworldindata.org to track the number of internet users every five years in order to show the dramatic increase in the internet's popularity during these two decades.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 83.

<sup>67</sup> Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie, and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Internet," *OurWorldInData.org*, 2015, <https://ourworldindata.org/internet>.

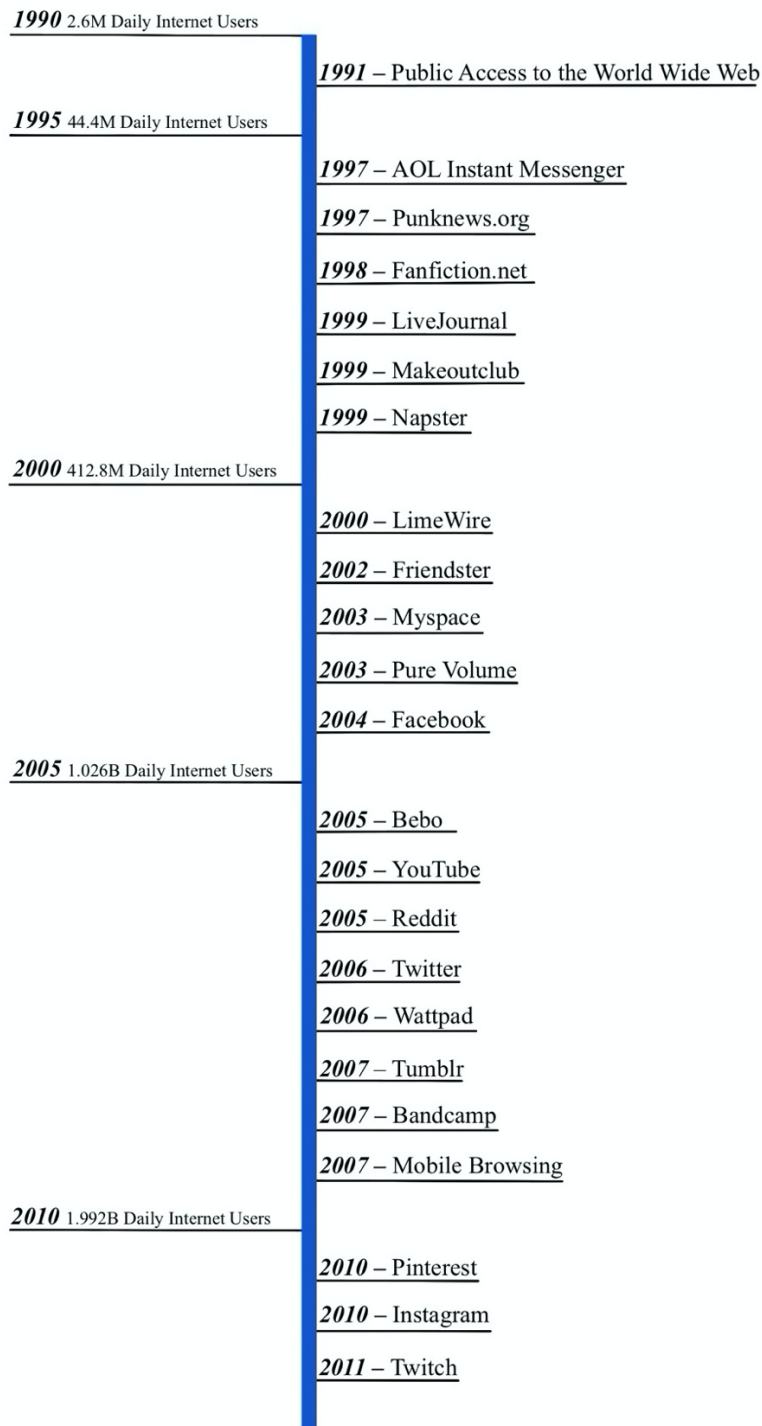


Figure 1.2 Relevant internet history spanning from 1990 to 2011. Produced by the author based on data from ourworldindata.org and Google.

## EARLY EMO COMMUNITIES

Andy Greenwald tells the story of teenagers stuck in a small town in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do and nowhere to go. These teens turned to America Online (AOL) out of desperation for more human connection than they got at school or at home. They logged onto what teen chatrooms they could find and made friends with people who lived far away from them. Many of these teens experienced bullying at their schools because of their clothing choices and tastes in music, but when they went online, they found a group of friends who liked the same things. Greenwald describes the community support, friendships, and space to discover one's identity that can be found on these sites.<sup>68</sup> The year 1999 ushered in the era of online journals and blogs with LiveJournal and Makeoutclub. Sites such as these allowed users to design profiles in ways that described them the way they wanted to be seen. Users could post their likes and dislikes, interests, and thoughts, and they could create usernames that they thought were funny or described them well. One of Greenwald's interviewees Kate Flannery said, "[Makeoutclub] is a place where you can totally build your own personality from scratch... You can be portrayed as you want to be portrayed and that doesn't happen in real life."<sup>69</sup>

A distinct phenomenon occurred with the rising popularity of the internet, and that is the use of the public internet as a personal diary. The founder of LiveJournal, Brad Fitzpatrick, reasoned that users must "find it easier to talk to everybody indirectly than one person directly."<sup>70</sup> On early sites like LiveJournal, this practice was far more

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<sup>68</sup> Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 269-310.

<sup>69</sup> Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 277.

<sup>70</sup> Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 287.

anonymous than it is today on major social media sites. Typically, on these early sites, a user's real name, age, and location were not shared until relationships were established with other users. At first, it was simply strangers sharing their problems with other strangers on the internet.

As one can imagine, these sites were not always limited to wholesome conversation. Chat rooms were full of fans complaining about "toxic fan culture" while they themselves were the toxic fans, telling those who disagreed with their opinions to kill themselves and frequently oversexualizing the musicians they were discussing. The fandom was and is full of cyberbullying, gossip, and misogyny. According to Fathallah, the misogyny of emo communities is often perpetuated by the female fans as they project an "I'm not like other girls" mindset. They look down on certain types of girls who they deem to be "unintelligent, brainwashed, and shallow."<sup>71</sup> This leads to gatekeeping within the fandom as "emo kids accumulate and exercise subcultural capital, policing the boundaries of their scene from those deemed inauthentic."<sup>72</sup> Girls were held to stricter standards in these communities than boys. These stricter standards within the online communities were also projected onto the musicians themselves. The emo fandom in general largely ignores female musicians, with Haley Williams of Paramore being the only exception. This lack of representation in emo music does not seem to bother female fans, as they do not actively seek out female-fronted groups. My first instinct was to attribute this to a type of "boy craze" or fans only being interested in bands with members

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<sup>71</sup> Fathallah, *Emo*, 34. This type of girl is usually a fan of boy bands such as One Direction. One Direction fans and emo fans tend to bully each other online.

<sup>72</sup> Fathallah, *Emo*, 34.

to whom they are attracted.<sup>73</sup> This would make sense if these emo fanbases were made up only of people who are sexually attracted to men, but that is not the case, leading me to believe that the root of this issue is internalized misogyny.

## TUMBLR ERA – THE EMO TRINITY

Much to the dismay of the elder emos, the transition of online emo fandom from LiveJournal to Tumblr brought about a new understanding of emo. In 2007, LiveJournal switched hands from the company Six Apart to the Russian media company SUP Media. While many users stuck around, the subsequent restructuring of the site led to a mass migration to other sites, specifically Tumblr.<sup>74</sup> However, the userbase of Tumblr was already significantly younger, and the fandom became predominantly based on third-wave emo. This iteration of the emo fandom affectionately dubbed My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy, and Panic! At the Disco the “Emo Trinity.”<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the fandom felt more drawn to these bands because of their age. At the beginning of their careers, all of these band members were in their late teens or very early twenties. Although none of these bands are active in the ways that they used to be, the Tumblr fandom still widely consider them the Emo Trinity, and they are still at the core of emo fandom.<sup>76</sup> In 2013, Tumblr began creating “A Year in Review,” which highlighted the

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<sup>73</sup> My instinct here is reinforced by the way female fans often treat and talk about the male musicians’ girlfriends and wives.

<sup>74</sup> Lori Morimoto and Louisa Ellen Stein, "Tumblr and Fandom" [editorial]. In "Tumblr and Fandom," edited by Lori Morimoto and Louisa Ellen Stein, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 27 (June 15, 2018), <https://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1580>.

<sup>75</sup> Fathallah, *Emo*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> My Chemical Romance disbanded in 2013, but announced a reunion tour in 2019. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, their tour has been postponed multiple times and will occur during the summer and fall of 2022. They are also appearing at festivals throughout the year 2022. Panic! At the Disco has changed personnel multiple times throughout their tenure, and since 2016, Brendon Urie has been the only member.

topics that were the most popular on the platform throughout the year. For their list of most popular bands on Tumblr that year, the Year in Review listed twenty-five bands, and One Direction was the only non-emo band to make the top ten.<sup>77</sup>

Although fandom has long been considered a queer space, the Tumblr era truly solidified the queer aesthetics of fandom.<sup>78</sup> Queer youth face unique struggles interacting with their peers and with authority figures, making community and shared experiences incredibly important for them. Tumblr has provided this shared experience for many. The company claims their platform is “the queerest place on the internet” with their users being 193% more likely to be LGBTQ compared to users of other platforms.<sup>79</sup> As of 2021, their data showed that one in four Tumblr users identified as LGBTQ.<sup>80</sup> The emo fandom’s move to Tumblr drew attention to the intersection of sexuality, gender, and emo. In her chapter in *Queering the Popular Pitch* entitled “Tickle Me Emo: Lesbian Balladeering, Straight-Boy Emo, and the Politics of Affect,” Karen Tongson identified the similarity of queer culture and emo culture as their “reliance on emotionally raw incarnations of arrested development in peripheral spaces.”<sup>81</sup> The vulnerability encouraged by this genre created a safe space for queer youth, and even without queer

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He has not released new music since 2018 or toured since 2019. Fall Out Boy has not released music since 2018 but is actively touring.

<sup>77</sup> @2013inreblogs, “Most Reblogged Bands and Groups,” Tumblr post, December, 2013, Accessed February 26, 2022, <https://2013inreblogs.tumblr.com/post/104079305602/most-reblogged-in-2013-bands-and-groups-one>.

<sup>78</sup> Stitch, “LGBTQ+ Fans: We’re Here, Queer, and Remaking Fandom in Our Own Image,” *teenVogue*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/lgbtq-fans-remaking-fandom-in-our-own-image-stitch-fan-service>.

<sup>79</sup> Lauren Strapagiel, “Tumblr Says It’s The Queerest Social Media Platform, But Can It Hold on to That?” *Buzzfeed News*, May 4, 2021, 2, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/laurenstrapagiel/tumblr-says-its-queerest-social-media-platform>.

<sup>80</sup> Strapagiel, “Tumblr Says It’s The Queerest Social Media Platform,” 2.

<sup>81</sup> Karen Tongson, “Tickle Me Emo: Lesbian Balladeering, Straight Boy Emo, and the Politics of Affect,” In *Queering the Popular Pitch* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 56.

representation within the bands, the band members' behavior lent itself to homoerotic interpretations which provided positive examples of masculinity.

## CONCLUSION

While emo may forever be a term that means different things to different people, the definitions and discourse presented here can serve as an introduction to understanding the broad range of opinions on this matter. Considering how closely tied fandom and identity are for teenagers, it makes sense that they would all have strong opinions on how to define something so important to them. The creation and rising popularity of the internet also gave a voice to every fan who wanted to express their feelings about the genre, which created even more debate about the "correct" definition but also provided a valuable resource for community and friendship built on shared passions and interests. This double-edged sword is an inseparable part of the internet and explains why there has always been debate regarding the pros and cons of the internet and specifically social media. Over the next few chapters, this debate will become even more pronounced.



## CHAPTER 3

### "I WRITE SINS NOT TRAGEDIES": FAN FICTION AND COVER BANDS! AT THE DISCO

#### INTRODUCTION TO PRODUCTIVE FANDOM

Fandom is more than passive consumption. It builds community and influences popular culture. Here, I discuss how fandom can be productive by inspiring fans to become writers and performers. In his 2020 article “Fans, Fandoms, or Fanaticism?” Gregorio Fuschillo describes the growth of fandom as exponential because “fandoms give birth to professional fans by shaping existing professions - for example, journalism and academia (aca-fan) - or ushering in new professions - for example, commemorative writers, bloggers, and video gamers.”<sup>82</sup> He makes the important distinction that fans are “more than simply consumers in view of their commitment to construct elaborate interpretations of their cult objects of consumption.”<sup>83</sup> In her book *Productive Fandom*, Nicolle Lamerichs identifies two types of fandom practices: affirmational and transformational.<sup>84</sup> Affirmational fandom practices involve consuming the “source text” as well as any other related media created by fans.<sup>85</sup> This fan-created media is created through transformational fandom practices, and it encompasses art, fictional stories, music, videos, etc. created by fans for other fans. Here, I discuss the history of fan fiction, how online fan fiction communities work, and what emo fan fiction is like. I then

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<sup>82</sup> Gregorio Fuschillo, “Fans, Fandoms, or Fanaticism?” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 20, no. 3 (2020): 347, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540518773822>.

<sup>83</sup> Fuschillo, “Fans, Fandoms, or Fanaticism?” 348.

<sup>84</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 113.

<sup>85</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 14. Lamerich defines “source text” as the existing text, which in the music fandom would be lyrics, music itself, music videos, and the real lives of the musicians.

highlight cover bands as a type of transformational fandom practice, giving two examples of commercially successful emo bands that began as cover bands.

## EARLY FAN FICTION

The term “fan fiction” was first used in print in 1939 as a somewhat derogatory way of distinguishing science fiction from “pro fiction.”<sup>86</sup> John Bristol Speer, aka “Jack F. Speer” along with many other pseudonyms, is often referred to as the father of fandom, and in 1944 he published his work *Fancylopedia* (now called “Fancy 1”). A facsimile of this original volume, as well as its contents in digital form, is now hosted on the website fancylopedia.org, and the third iteration of *Fancylopedia* is now fully digital.<sup>87</sup> In his original encyclopedia, Speers defined fan fiction as

Sometimes improperly used to mean fan science fiction, that is, ordinary fantasy published in a fan magazine. Properly, the term means fiction about fans, or sometimes about pros, and occasionally bringing in some famous characters from stf stories. It may refer to fans by name: “Tucker nudged Brackney, who was nursing a black eye”, or it may be about types, especially Joe Fann. The background may be either fantastic, as “Joe Fann into Space”, or mundane, as in “Murder at the Chicon” ... Fictitious elements are often interspersed in accounts of fan activities, which may make them more interesting...<sup>88</sup>

Fan fiction is a way for fans to insert themselves into the material that they love by either writing themselves into the story or simply by being in charge of the narrative. With its roots in science fiction, fan fiction provided an escape from reality where a fan could

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<sup>86</sup> Jeff Prucher ed., *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 57.

<sup>87</sup> The website Fancylopedia.org has scans of the Fancy 1 book, and everything else is set up as an online encyclopedia such as Wikipedia.

<sup>88</sup> John Bristol, *Fancylopedia*, Los Angeles: Forest J. Ackerman, 1944, 31.

imagine themselves in an alternate universe and interact with their favorite characters. It satiates the desire fans often have for more content within their given fandom.

## FAN FICTION AFTER THE INTERNET

The creation of the internet introduced a new era of fan fiction by creating niche communities and easily accessible content that could be distributed instantly across the world. Fan fiction made up thirty-three percent of book-related content on the internet in 2008.<sup>89</sup> As early as the '80s, fan fiction writers would distribute their work via emailing lists. In 1998, Xing Li created the website FanFiction.net with no restrictions on the type of fan fiction content allowed. Within four years, the site had garnered around 115,000 members; around eighty percent identified as female, and around thirty-three percent were eighteen or younger.<sup>90</sup> Launching soon after in 1999, the blog site LiveJournal was the next major place for fan fiction. In their book *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins, Ford, and Green state that “female fans were early adopters of social network technologies such as LiveJournal...using the resources offered by new media technologies...to create their own distinct forms of participatory culture.”<sup>91</sup> For her book, Lamerichs chose to limit her fan fiction sample to only LiveJournal because of its feminist reception culture, easy interface, and extensive fan documentation.<sup>92</sup> Allison McCrackin identifies Tumblr’s equity as the source of its appeal. There is no algorithm to boost popular posts and hide unpopular ones—the dashboard is organized chronologically such that “young Tumblr

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<sup>89</sup> Bill Tancer, *Click: What Millions of People Are Doing Online and Why it Matters*, New York City: Hyperion Books, 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Maryanne Murray Buechner, “Pop Fiction,” *Time Magazine*, 2002.

<sup>91</sup> Henry Jenkins, Sam Green, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture, Postmillennial Pop*, New York: New York University Press, 2012, 29-30.

<sup>92</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 122.

users are not automatically marginalized or disparaged because of their age or unpopular opinions.”<sup>93</sup> Tumblr fan fiction is still a thriving corner of the internet. A difficult part of my research was actually finding fan fiction written in the early 2000s. Even though the emo genre has somewhat faded away and many bands that were the subject of fan fictions have broken up, new fan fiction is constantly being written, meaning the old fan fiction is often buried by Tumblr’s chronological interface.<sup>94</sup>

There is a webpage created by a user named Moonbeam that is full of current (as of 2017) popular fandom terminology and its definitions. On this page, Moonbeam defines fan fiction as “refer[ing] to derivative creative stories featuring the characters, settings, premises, etc... based on the original source material, but written by a fan. It is a form of transformative work designed as an expression of appreciation and exploration of the canon material. No profit is made from its production or distribution; no harm is meant.”<sup>95</sup> There are many reasons why a fan might choose to write fan fiction. Lamerichs points out that the writing of fan fiction can be a way for fans to have a “sense of ownership over the fiction they love.”<sup>96</sup> It could also be a way to gain “narrative closure.”<sup>97</sup> Sometimes, these stories are called “fix it fics” because they are intended to fix the story in a way that the fan fiction writer likes more than what actually happened; often, this involves writing happy endings or fixing gaping plot-holes. If the subject of a fandom lacks diversity, fans may take it on themselves to fill in the gaps. For instance,

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<sup>93</sup> Allison McCracken, “Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement,” *Cinema Journal* 57, 1 (2017): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061>.

<sup>94</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 154. Lamerichs calls this phenomenon “post-object fandom.”

<sup>95</sup> Moonbeam’s Predilections, “Fanfiction Terminology,” Moonbeam’s Fanfictions Predilections (blog), Updated September 2017, <https://www.angelfire.com/falcon/moonbeam/terms.html#R>.

<sup>96</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 16.

<sup>97</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 33.

the cultural domain of fan fiction has long been considered a “queer space” as it provides an opportunity to create representation and explore alternate identities.<sup>98</sup> McCrackin addresses this idea in her article and says that

when media texts do not directly offer developed minority representations, Tumblr users create it. They develop queer readings of texts in character art, GIF sets, or through fan fiction; thus, Captain America Steve Rogers of the Marvel universe is considered bisexual because that's how Tumblr users largely read and portray him. Users also frequently reconceptualize well-known white characters as people of color by 'race bending,' and 'fan casting,' in which famous roles played by white actors are recast with famous actors of color.<sup>99</sup>

In another attempt to pinpoint why fans write fan fiction, Fuschillo offers that “early studies on media fandom conceive fans as holding the political power to rework media texts and their meanings. ...In this perspective, old and new media are a battlefield where underdog fans challenge the top-down messages of powerful elites.”<sup>100</sup> Once the art reaches the hands of fans, it takes on a life of its own, and the artist no longer has control over the narrative. This concept is central to the genre of emo; recall my discussion in chapter one regarding how fans put the “emo” label on bands that did not want it. In a similar way, some musicians did not appreciate the fan fiction written about them. In the case of MCR, Frank and Gerard frequently made out on stage to get a reaction from their fans. However, once they discovered that this led to sexual fan fiction being written about what the fans called “Frerard,” they stopped doing so. In one of many interviews with journalist Tom Bryant, Gerard said, “The whole thing with me and Frank doing stuff onstage together was really just to irritate people...and it was funny for a brief

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<sup>98</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 114.

<sup>99</sup> McCracken, "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement," 155.

<sup>100</sup> Fuschillo, “Fans, Fandoms, or Fanaticism?” 353.

period...but people started getting into it, so we stopped.”<sup>101</sup> Despite how bands feel about it, fan fiction is an inescapable part of fandom. As long as they have imaginations and enough free time, fans will continue writing fan fiction as a way to express themselves creatively, interact with their peers, and make the fandom their own.

“Frerard” is an example of what in fandom practices is called “shipping.” According to Moonbeam, shipping is “support[ing] the idea of two specific characters being involved in a romantic or sexual relationship.”<sup>102</sup> When speaking about the relationship, fans use the word “ship.” Many fans will have a favorite ship that is called an “OTP” which stands for “one true pairing.” The term “slash” is used to describe fan fictions that feature sex between two males. The men in question may or may not be gay in the real world, but in the slash, they are commonly queered by being “emotionally confronted with homosexual feelings.”<sup>103</sup> Fans would write stories about Frank/Gerard, and that became shortened to “Frerard.”<sup>104</sup> This was becoming a trend in fandom at the same time that celebrity power couples such as Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez or Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were given the portmanteaus “Bennifer” and “Brangelina” respectively. Since the overwhelming majority of emo bands are made up of male members, most emo band fan fiction is slash. The most popular band members to have

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<sup>101</sup> Tom Bryant, *Not the Life it Seems: The True Lives of My Chemical Romance* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2014), 109.

<sup>102</sup> Moonbeam’s Predilections, “Fanfiction Terminology.”

<sup>103</sup> Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 123.

<sup>104</sup> This practice of writing “Name1/Name2” is also used for women, but it is called “femslash” or “femmeslash.”

slash fiction written about them are those that Tumblr users refer to as the “Emo Trinity.” Popular ships from these bands include Frerard, Peterick, Trohley, Ryden, and Brallon.<sup>105</sup>

One popular LiveJournal emo fan fiction community is called Famous Last Fic, and it—like many other fan communities—has a specific format for how fan fiction is to be posted. The format is determined to help readers know what type of story it is, who the characters are, what universe it is set in, and what possible triggers there might be. Each post varies slightly, but a typical format includes: title, author, rating, pairing, warnings, summary, and notes. Fan fiction writers also tag each post so that readers can find specific types of stories more easily. Along the webpage’s righthand side, there is a list of all the tags used within the community. Since Famous Last Fic is specifically an MCR fan fiction community, there are tags for every possible pairing of the five members as well as other people who frequently appear in the stories.<sup>106</sup> The tag “crossover” indicates that the MCR characters will interact with characters from another fandom or an entirely different universe. Famous Last Fic began on May 29, 2007 at 4:26 am, which is an example of the chaotic energy consistent across most fandom communities.

Fan fiction provides a way for fans to use their writing skills to be creators rather than passive consumers. With one of the core themes of fandom being identity, this transformational fandom practice allows fans to leave their mark on the fandom and make it their own. In this way, the fandom is ever-evolving with new fans making new

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<sup>105</sup> Peterick is Pete Wentz and Patrick Stump of Fall Out Boy; Trohley is Joe Trohman and Andy Hurley of Fall Out Boy; Ryden is Ryan Ross and Brendon Urie of Panic! At The Disco; and Brallon is Brendon Urie and Dallan Weeks of Panic! At The Disco.

<sup>106</sup> Famous Last Fic is a reference to the song “Famous Last Words” on My Chemical Romance’s 2006 album *The Black Parade*.

contributions, and recurring themes from fan fictions are often popularized and become ingrained in the fandom's lore.

## COVER BANDS

For fans who are musically inclined, there is another type of transformational fandom practice: cover bands, meaning bands who reproduce music by other artists. Usage of the word “cover” goes back to the mid-1940s. Before recording, music was always a live event, and since reproducing works written by someone else was simply the way music was shared there was no need to have a special term for it. In his thesis on the topic, Sean Dineley concludes that the word cover “was born largely in the context of industry and economics rather than in the realm of musical expression. Cover versions’ earliest incarnations reveal a trade language shared by newspapers, radio, television, and record companies, who all had the same goal in mind: spread their message (or product) to as many consumers as possible.”<sup>107</sup> Some cover bands do their best to mimic the original music’s sound exactly (sometimes called “tribute acts”), while others adapt the music to their own unique sound. Dineley calls these two practices “conservation” and “transformation” respectively.<sup>108</sup> There are countless tribute acts for older popular musicians like The Beatles and Elvis Presley, and Georgina Gregory’s book *Send in the Clones: A Cultural Study of the Tribute Band* seeks to address the significance of bands like these as a cultural phenomenon. Gregory argues that tribute acts are not taken seriously because they provide no original products to be commercialized but that their

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<sup>107</sup> Sean Dineley, "Covers Uncovered: A History of the "Cover Version," from Bing Crosby to the Flaming Lips" (master's thesis, UWO, 2014), 3, <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/2119>.

<sup>108</sup> Dineley, “Covers Uncovered,” 54.



role is important in keeping the tradition of live music going.<sup>109</sup> Yet, there is more to music than its potential for commercialization. Tribute acts and cover bands are expressions of the appreciation and enjoyment of music. However, there are instances where a love of music has led fans to create cover bands which in turn do meet commercial success.

At least two very successful emo bands had their humble beginnings as high school cover bands of Blink-182. One of these bands began when the fans who formed it were freshmen in high school in 2003, and they called themselves All Time Low (hereafter referred to as ATL). Their guitarist Jack Barakat once tweeted: “When I was 12 I would listen to Blink’s live album and jam out in my grandparents basement on an unplugged guitar wishing I was in a band.”<sup>110</sup> His dream came true less than a year later when he met classmate Alex Gaskarth and convinced him to become a Blink-182 fan. The two of them started playing Blink covers with a drummer friend for the next year before meeting Rian Dawson. Jack knew Rian was a better drummer than the one in their band, so he spent the year trying to convince Rian to join them. Rian finally came to a band practice and stepped in when their current drummer could not play the Blink song “Roller Coaster” (2001). The next month, bassist Zack Merrick joined them, and ATL was formed.<sup>111</sup> Eighteen years later, this band is still a core part of the scene they used to admire. Their 2008 hit “Dear Maria Count Me In” was certified 2x Platinum in 2021 after

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<sup>109</sup> Georgina Gregory, *Send in the Clones: A Cultural Study of the Tribute Band* (Bristol: Equinox Publishing, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> Jack Barakat (@JackAllTimeLow), “When I was 12 I would listen to Blink’s live album and jam out in my grandparents basement on an unplugged guitar wishing I was in a band,” Twitter, June 27, 2009, 10:29 a.m. (deleted, screen captured on Pinterest), <https://pin.it/1ZSqAwu>.

<sup>111</sup> Ophelia Amoret Black (@opheliaamoret), Pinterest pin (“How ATL formed....According to Jack”), n.d. Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/3IBGewE>.

going viral on TikTok. In January 2022, they set the record for the longest continuous run on *Billboard*'s Alternative Airplay chart with their song "Monsters" featuring blackbear and Demi Lovato listed on the chart for eighty-eight weeks. They have become friends and collaborators with their inspiration Blink-182, with Alex even forming a side project with Blink's Mark Hoppus. On their 2020 album *Wake Up, Sunshine*, ATL wrote their final track "Basement Noise" as a tribute to their roots as a cover band. Here, they lean into the DIY sound of the early 2000s, and the chorus goes: "They're just stupid boys making basement noise / In the basement."<sup>112</sup>

Another cover band was just a few years older in 2004 when they created Panic! At the Disco (hereafter referred to as P!ATD). Among online fan-spaces, legend has it that Brendon Urie began his career singing for tips while working in a smoothie shop to support his music career until Pete Wentz, both a member of Fall Out Boy and the owner of DCD2 Records (known as Decaydance Records at the time an imprint label of Warner's Fueled by Ramen,) discovered him. Interviews with Brendon reveal that this is somewhat true. Brendon did work in a smoothie shop to support the band during its early years, and he would make up songs to sing to customers using the tunes of arena rock hits. However, that is not how Pete Wentz discovered P!ATD. On Thanksgiving Day 2003, the website PureVolume was launched. This website was used to upload and share music. It was well known in the music scene that record labels, and specifically the label Fueled by Ramen, were looking at PureVolume to find new bands to sign, and the members of the newly-formed P!ATD took full advantage of that, uploading two songs to the platform and then emailing them to Pete with a message Brendon paraphrased as

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<sup>112</sup> All Time Low, "Basement Noise," track 15 on *Wake Up, Sunshine*, Fueled by Ramen, 2020.

saying, “listen dude, listen to our songs, we’ll show you how we’re better than your band.”<sup>113</sup> Brendon goes on to describe Pete taking this message as an invitation to listen to P!ATD and tell them exactly how awful they were. However, much to everyone’s surprise, after checking the band out on PureVolume, Pete invited P!ATD to play for him in person. Their meeting resulted in P!ATD being signed to Fueled by Ramen.

Even though P!ATD has achieved world-wide fame, they still participate in transformational fandom practices by covering their favorite artists while warming up before shows. Among their favorites are the 1970s bands Queen and Kansas.<sup>114</sup> In fact, Brendon’s rendition of “Bohemian Rhapsody” has become popular with many fans, although some Queen fans question what gives him the right to perform such an iconic song. He does not really know how to answer that question except to say that he sings the song because he loves it and has fun performing it.<sup>115</sup> After more than a decade writing and performing his own music, Brendon is still a fanboy at heart. The Queen fandom actually has another surprising connection to the emo scene of the early 2000s, and that is through the band MCR. It only takes one listen to hear the similarities of “Welcome to the Black Parade” (2006) and “Bohemian Rhapsody” (1975). In Bryant’s MCR biography, he recounts the times that they have talked to him about their admiration of Queen. Guitarist Ray Toro revealed that Brian May is his idol, and May made Ray’s fanboy

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<sup>113</sup> Musicians Institute, “Panic! At The Disco Interview Part. 2 | MI Conversation Series,” YouTube video, February 19, 2016, 2:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJcV6eu5LKg&t=726s>.

<sup>114</sup> Musicians Institute, “Panic! At The Disco Interview,” 12:00.

<sup>115</sup> Musicians Institute, “Panic! At The Disco Interview,” 11:24.

dreams come true in 2011 at the Reading Festival by enthusiastically joining MCR onstage to perform “Welcome to the Black Parade.”<sup>116</sup>

The entire mainstream emo movement of the early 2000s can arguably be attributed to PureVolume, considering the bands that found their start on this website include the iconic groups Gym Class Heroes, Paramore, Boys Like Girls, Fall Out Boy, All Time Low, Taking Back Sunday, My Chemical Romance, Twenty One Pilots, and Brand New. This platform was the first of its type. It allowed artists to create a profile, share pictures, announce concert or tour information, and, most importantly, upload music for streaming and enable downloading.<sup>117</sup> Having been a part of the first generation of bands to find their start on the internet, these artists have been quick to adapt to the ever-changing possibilities the internet has to offer. When asked about their relationship with social media, Alex of ATL said

Social media has been a big thing for us. We were one of the first bands on PureVolume and one of the first bands to have a music account on Myspace—years ago when that stuff first launched. From there, it’s obviously evolved into Facebook, Twitter, all those things. We really love Twitter because you get to choose what you put out there, and it’s sort of a direct line to the fans, which is amazing. I love the fact that we can share any aspect of our day, our tour or our lives, and you can interact back and forth. I think that’s helped our band grow and maintain a grassroots following throughout our career...[social media has] certainly been one of our biggest forms for reaching out. Like I said, from the days of Myspace and PureVolume to Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook and all those things we use now to communicate with our fanbase and followers—we rely on them. It’s how we promote our tours, promote our videos, promote our music. It’s how everybody finds out about us really.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Bryant, *Not the Life it Seems*, 289; Anushka Babushka, “My Chemical Romance Welcome to The Black Parade Live with Brian May!” YouTube video, 6:23, October 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfaxD9bxCHw>.

<sup>117</sup> Bandcamp is the modern equivalent of this platform with the main difference being that Bandcamp allows for monetization.

<sup>118</sup> Siri Svay, “All Time Low on Touring, Songwriting, and Social Media,” Music Connection, 2015, <https://www.musicconnection.com/all-time-low-touring-songwriting-social-media/>.

Judging by the frequency of other bands' social media usage, it is likely that many of them feel the same way, although Brendon seems to prefer using Instagram Live and Twitch to interact with his fans. There is a wholesome sense of having come full circle when considering how these famous men who started out as high school fans playing the music they loved in basements and garages now use the very platforms that made them famous to reach out and connect with young fans who may or may not be doing the exact same things.

## CONCLUSION

I want to emphasize that the goal of cover bands does not always have to be “being discovered,” becoming rich and famous, and participating in a capitalist machine. ATL and P!ATD worked well as examples of cover bands for my purposes here because their fame made it easy to find information about their early days playing covers. The romantic emo fan in me wants to believe that for every cover band that reached fame, there are probably a hundred others that either tried and failed or simply had the time of their lives playing the music that they loved. Unfortunately, because of the underground DIY nature of these cover bands, there is no data about bands that never achieved fame, and so we are left to wonder.

Similarly to the ways that ATL and P!ATD achieved fame and fortune, some writers of fan fiction have monetized their skill, and some—like E. L. James with her *Fifty Shades of Grey* series—have been published and had their work become famous.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> E. L. James is the penname for writer Erika Mitchell. Her best-selling erotic trilogy *Fifty Shades* began as a *Twilight* fan fiction called “Master of the Universe.”

While this is certainly an exciting occurrence for those writers who wished to build their careers in this way, it is not the purpose of fan fiction and should not intimidate aspiring fan fiction writers. The purpose of transformational fandom is for fans to be inspired to create new material to share within their community. It is a way for fans to interact with each other and engage critically with the material that they all know and love.

## CHAPTER 4

### "I'M NOT OKAY (I PROMISE)": THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN EMO

#### INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter, it is important to give attention to one of the most quintessential elements of emo culture and music, and that is mental illness. Young, Sweeting, and West's 2006 study "indicated that being emo was a predictor of psychological dysfunction."<sup>120</sup> Why is this? There is a fan-made graphic on Pinterest with the quote: "All bands stand for something." It goes on to list six emo bands and what fans believe they represent: Pierce the Veil – Self Harm; Simple Plan – Loneliness; Sleeping with Sirens – Being in love; Of Mice & Men – Missing Somebody; All Time Low – Anxiety; My Chemical Romance – Being different.<sup>121</sup> The comments under this post, however, are the most revealing as fans continue listing bands and what they mean to them: Panic! At the Disco – Realizing life is great and you have so many great things ahead of you (honorable mention – being gay and drunk); Fall Out Boy – Preventing dark thoughts; Black Veil Brides – Accepting who you are; Amity Affliction – life is worth it and you deserve to be loved; Green Day – go live your life; Paramore – growing up and accepting yourself; Bring Me the Horizon – depression; Twenty One Pilots – you are not alone in the hardest times and stay alive.<sup>122</sup> Another post from Tumblr user @scruffyfrank in the same vein states that "fall out boy makes music for the kids that no

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<sup>120</sup> quoted in Nathalie Chernoff and Sue Widdicombe, "I Was Bored so...': Motivational Accounts of Participation in an Online Emo Group," *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 306.

<sup>121</sup> Hope (@YourOnlyHopeC), Pinterest pin, before 2019, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/78zflTc>. Paraphrased and edited for clarity by the author.

<sup>122</sup> Hope (@YourOnlyHopeC), Pinterest pin, before 2019, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/78zflTc>. Paraphrased and edited for clarity by the author.

one believes in...my chemical romance made music for the kids that didn't believe in themselves."<sup>123</sup> User @ierotic re-blogged the post and added a tag saying, "#and patd makes music 4 kids who r gay."<sup>124</sup> All of these (with the exception of being drunk) are important messages for teenagers, especially teenagers who are struggling with mental illness.

According to the CDC, anxiety and depression in adolescents have increased over the years. From 2003 to 2012, the percentage of adolescents aged six to seventeen with depression and/or anxiety increased by 3% (over one million).<sup>125</sup> This timeframe corresponds exactly with third-wave emo music's heyday. Critics of the genre claim that it is the music causing such high rates of anxiety and depression, but this is a fallacy similar to "video games cause violence."<sup>126</sup> There are several other plausible explanations for this correlation, and it is likely that it is in truth a combination of many factors. One explanation is that emo musicians themselves have anxiety and depression and that this causes them to write the music they need to hear to help themselves cope. These musicians may also have witnessed young people struggling with these issues and chosen to write music to speak directly to their fans. Another explanation for this correlation is

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<sup>123</sup> @scruffyfrank, Tumblr, "fall out boy makes music for the kids that no one believes in," c. 2015-2018, Quoted in PHISH (@dana\_jim), Pinterest pin, before 2018, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/5MM2V8F>.

<sup>124</sup> @scruffyfrank, Tumblr, "fall out boy makes music for the kids that no one believes in," c. 2015-2018, Quoted in PHISH (@dana\_jim), Pinterest pin, before 2018, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/5MM2V8F>. While a comment like this can come across as pejorative, it was made by a fan in a queer affirming safe space (the Tumblr fan community) and is meant to point out that P!ATD creates music that speaks to gay youth. Had this exact comment been made by an outsider on Facebook or another social media platform that is less queerly aligned than Tumblr, I would interpret it to be an unkind comment.

<sup>125</sup> "Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 15, 2020, 5, <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>.

<sup>126</sup> Torben Grodal, "Evolutionary Theory and the Naturalist Fallacy," *Style* 42, no. 2-3 (2008): 195, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.42.2-3.192>.



the political and social climate of the 2000s.<sup>127</sup> MCR formed in 2001 as a direct response to Gerard Way witnessing the towers of the World Trade Center fall.<sup>128</sup> In the wake of 9/11, life in the United States changed forever, and the war with Iraq was a point of contention for many. National surveys conducted immediately after 9/11 “described substantial symptoms of stress across the country, with 35% of children presenting with at least one stress symptom and 47% with safety worries.”<sup>129</sup> Perhaps their hopelessness and powerlessness drew them to this genre of music where people screamed about death, depression, and distrust of the government. Whether or not the events of 9/11 and the ensuing war directly caused this increase in adolescent depression and anxiety is debatable, but what is not debatable is that these events played a major role in shaping the world in which these children lived and influenced their reactions to this world.

For better or for worse, emo fans with mental health struggles turned to the internet for support and community with their peers. This chapter will explore how fans used online community and the music itself to cope with their feelings and share common experiences. I will also discuss the problems with making a simple binary judgment regarding whether online community is helpful or harmful to young people with mental illnesses. One might expect for a fandom’s online interactions to be based primarily on the object of their fandom, but in the case of the emo fandom, the object of the fandom—emo bands and music—is just a launching point to get into topics surrounding depression

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<sup>127</sup> Christina Murtagh, “How 9/11 Shaped Emo Culture,” *The Odyssey Online*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/how-9-11-shaped-the-emo-cultural-phenomenon>.

<sup>128</sup> Gavin Haynes, “Gerard Way Witnessing 9/11,” *Vice*, March 26, 2013, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/r3nwg3/gerard-way-witnessed-nine-eleven>.

<sup>129</sup> Cecile Rousseau, Uzma Jamil, Kamaldeep Bhui, and Meriem Boudjarane, “Consequences of 9/11 and the War on Terror on Children’s and Young Adult’s Mental Health: A Systematic Review of the Past 10 Years,” *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 20, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104513503354>, 176.

and the troubles that accompany coming of age. Greenwald affirms this, saying that “emo music ends up taking a back seat to the communities it helps foster.”<sup>130</sup> In their “netnographic” research of the online emo subculture, Mortara and Ironico wrote that the “qualitative content analysis of texts, images, videos, drawings and other forms of fan art typical of this micro culture has revealed four key-areas of semantic-value: the aestheticization of inner pain, the sense of alienation and isolation from socio-cultural mainstream, the search for authenticity and the need for emotional connection.”<sup>131</sup> Here, I will address the ways that mental illness manifests in online emo communities by observing online discourse, analyzing emo music and lyrics, and examining the relationship between fans and artists. I will include two case studies of suicide and the effects that they had on the bands as well as examples of band members trying to make a difference in their fans’ lives by advocating for mental health awareness and resources.

### SELF-HARM

In her article, “Misogyny in Emo,” Katie Fielding identifies emotional release as the “defining feature” of emo music.<sup>132</sup> She says that “talking about things that aren’t normally talked about...often is an incredibly healthy tool for overcoming trauma or depression.”<sup>133</sup> In addition to using these forums to talk about their trauma or depression,

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<sup>130</sup> Jon Caramanica, “The Emo Diaries: No Wonder the Band is Called Confessional,” *New York Times*, Aug 10, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/10/arts/music-the-emo-diaries-no-wonder-the-band-is-called-confessional.html>.

<sup>131</sup> Ariela Mortara and Simona Ironico, “Deconstructing Emo Lifestyle and Aesthetics: a Netnographic Research,” *Young consumers* 14, no. 4 (2013): 353. "defined by Kozinets (2002, p. 62) as 'a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications.'"

<sup>132</sup> Katie Fielding, “Misogyny in Emo,” 4.

<sup>133</sup> Katie Fielding, “Misogyny in Emo,” 4.

teens also shared images of their own self-harm. Some members claimed that seeing these photos online and reading about other people's struggles actually helped to "alleviate self-harming impulses."<sup>134</sup> On the other hand, there is the possibility that so much exposure led to "group contagion," explaining why an entire subculture struggled with self-harm.<sup>135</sup> The results of one study on emo networking groups showed an overwhelming promotion and glorification of self-harm.<sup>136</sup> In some fan communities, cutting was a right of passage fans bragged about online.<sup>137</sup>

A 2012 study entitled "The Representation of Self-Injury and Suicide on Emo Social Networking Groups" analyzed the walls and discussion boards found on two different online emo groups with the goal of discovering whether these groups glorified self-harm and suicidal tendencies. The content on these sites was reflective of emo lyrics such as "we'll meet again when both our cars collide," "have another drink and drive yourself home," "the ribbon on my wrist says do not open before Christmas," "I want to hate you half as much as I hate myself," "scars remind me that the past is real," "cut my wrists and black my eyes so I can fall asleep tonight or die," and "one day I'll lose this fight as we fade in the dark."<sup>138</sup> Lyrics like this attracted depressed adolescents by describing how they were already feeling in an eloquent and poetic way.

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<sup>134</sup> quoted in Nathalie Chernoff and Sue Widdicombe, "I Was Bored so...': Motivational Accounts of Participation in an Online Emo Group," *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 306.

<sup>135</sup> quoted in Nathalie Chernoff and Sue Widdicombe, "I Was Bored so...': Motivational Accounts of Participation in an Online Emo Group," *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 306.

<sup>136</sup> Zdanow and Wright, "The Representation of Self Injury and Suicide," 98.

<sup>137</sup> Zdanow and Wright, "The Representation of Self Injury and Suicide," 86.

<sup>138</sup> My Chemical Romance, "Helena," track 1 on *Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge*, Reprise Records, 2004, compact disc; Brand New, "Seventy Times 7," track 9 on *Your Favorite Weapon*, Triple Crown Records, 2001, compact disc; Fall out Boy, "Our Lawyer Made Us Change the Name of This Song So We Wouldn't Get Sued," track 1 on *From Under the Cork Tree*, Island Records, 2005, compact disc; Fall out Boy, "The Pros and Cons of Breathing," track 8 on *Take This to Your Grave*, Island Records, 2003, compact disc; Papa Roach, "Scars," track 8 on *Getting Away with Murder*, Geffen Records, 2005, compact disc;

## HANNAH BOND'S SUICIDE

On September 23, 2008, a thirteen-year-old emo fan named Hannah Bond committed suicide. Her screen name on the social media site Bebo was Living Disaster, and her bio read, “Hi I’m Hannah and I’m addicted to My Chemical Romance especially Gerard Way.”<sup>139</sup> Her page’s most recent activity was a photo of a girl with bloody wrists and another of a handwritten message saying “Dear Diary, today I give up...”<sup>140</sup> In the wake of this tragedy, *The Daily Mail* published an infamous article entitled “Why No Child Is Safe From The Sinister Cult Of Emo.”<sup>141</sup> The article accused MCR of being directly responsible for Bond’s suicide by “glamorizing” the idea of death and suicide. This moral panic, which fed upon parents’ genuine concern for their children’s wellbeing, was echoed by conservative and religious media, and misinformation was rampant. *Religious News Blog* cited the lyric “And though you’re dead and gone believe me your memory will carry on” from MCR’s hit single “Welcome to the Black Parade” as a cause for concern and an example of glamorizing death. MCR issued a statement expressing their sympathy for the family of the deceased and stating that “the message and theme of our album ‘The Black Parade’ is hope and courage. Our lyrics are about finding the strength to keep living through pain and hard times. The last song on our album states: ‘I am not afraid to keep on living’ – a sentiment that embodies the band’s position on

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Hawthorne Heights, “Ohio is for Lovers,” track 8 on *The Silence in Black and White*, Victory, 2004, compact disc; My Chemical Romance, “The Light Behind Your Eyes,” track 2 on *Conventional Weapons: Number Three*, Reprise Records, 2012, compact disc.

<sup>139</sup> “Girl, 13, Hangs Herself after Becoming Obsessed with Emo ‘Suicide Cult’ Rock Band,” Religion News Blog, May 8, 2008, <https://www.religionnewsblog.com/21381/emo-suicide-3>.

<sup>140</sup> “Girl, 13, Hangs Herself,” Religion News Blog.

<sup>141</sup> Tom Rawstorne, “Why No Child Is Safe from the Sinister Cult of Emo,” Daily Mail Online (Associated Newspapers, May 16, 2008), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-566481/Why-child-safe-sinister-cult-emo.html>.

hardships we all face as human beings.”<sup>142</sup> Gerard Way addressed fans directly, saying, “This article said that people who listened to our music—they called you a cult. A CULT. and said we promote self harm and suicide You all know it’s not true. We want you to live. We want to save your lives. You saved ours. We never want to let a single thing hurt any of you. and you should all know.. If you support us.. You are not a cult. You are a fucking ARMY.”<sup>143</sup>

Only MCR can reveal their personal intent behind their music, but the effect of their music can really only be determined by the interpretation and reception of the fans. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, among the emo fandom there are universal understandings of what each band stands for, and in a similar way, the fandom has universal interpretations of the music itself. “Welcome to the Black Parade” is epic and triumphant in the style of 1970s rock opera, and there are many similarities to Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” in both its style and structure. Rock operas pull structurally from the Romantic operatic tradition. In a rock opera, rock bands craft a narrative to be told throughout an album and typically create accompanying personas. Examples of culturally significant rock opera albums are *The Wall*, *Ziggy Stardust*, and *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. The story of *The Black Parade* is about the final days of “the Patient” who is dying of cancer. Much like “Bohemian Rhapsody,” “Welcome to the Black Parade” can be divided into musical sections with distinct themes. The opening theme begins with the iconic G note on the piano and a simple

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<sup>142</sup> New Musical Express, “My Chemical Romance Speak About 'Emo' Suicide,” May 25, 2008, <https://www.nme.com/news/music/my-chemical-romance-110-1321591>.

<sup>143</sup> iFunny (@tm3106), Pinterest pin, before 2019, Screenshot from iFunny, 2011-2019, Quote, 2008, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/6DMGtSh>.

repeating melody that steps down, jumps up a perfect fourth and then down a perfect fifth.<sup>144</sup> These perfect intervals create a hollow and isolated sound, and the line ends by jumping up to the dominant rather than resolving on the tonic G. This theme is repeated eight times with progressive layering. Next, Gerard enters with his vocals repeating the piano line. His character is the Patient who is reminiscing on being a child and seeing a marching band at a parade with their father. The electric guitar then joins in playing a countermelody and the drums begin a marching beat, symbolizing the parade marching on. The entire band finally joins, and they launch triumphantly into the theme in a faster tempo which helps them transition into the second section. This section is more than double the speed of the opening, and the drums and rhythm guitar emphasizing the forward motion and all of the instruments combined. The result is a rich texture characteristic of rock. This section is structured like its own song with two distinct verses and a chorus. It also ventures into the relative minor key, perhaps symbolizing the Patient's fear of death and of not being worthy of leaving a legacy. The music returns to the major key just in time for the final section which is defiant and confident. The electric guitar solos throughout this section immediately call to mind the great guitar solos of Van Halen, Gilmour of Pink Floyd, and May of Queen. The marching snare returns and Gerard screams the words

Do or die, you'll never make me / Because the world will never take my heart /  
Go and try, you'll never break me / We want it all, we wanna play this part / I  
won't explain or say I'm sorry / I'm unashamed, I'm gonna show my scars / Give  
a cheer for all the broken / Listen here, because it's who we are / Just a man, I'm

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<sup>144</sup> Emily Carter, "Andrew Lloyd Webber Celebrates 'Iconic' Black Parade g Note," *Kerrang!*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.kerrang.com/andrew-lloyd-webber-celebrates-iconic-black-parade-g-note>; Holley Gawne, "MCR Fan May've Found What Inspired 'Welcome to the Black Parade' Intro," *Don't Bore Us*, November 23, 2020, <https://dontboreus.thebrag.com/editorial/mcr-fan-may-have-found-what-inspired-the-iconic-piano-intro-to-welcome-to-the-black-parade/>.

not a hero / Just a boy, who had to sing this song / Just a man, I'm not a hero / I don't care / We'll carry on, we'll carry on / And though you're dead and gone, believe me / Your memory will carry on.<sup>145</sup>

While these lyrics are certainly about death, they are not about glamorizing death, but rather overcoming the fear of death and at the same time overcoming the fear of life.

They are about parent and grandparent relationships during life and the belief that our departed loved ones watch over us after death.<sup>146</sup> Bryant's MCR biography describes how the year that the band wrote this album was one of the worst years of their lives, and this song is about finding the strength to carry on.<sup>147</sup>

While Hannah Bond's suicide received the more press coverage than any other similar case, there were many other young fans during this era who took their own lives, such as nineteen-year-old Olivia Jane Penpraze from Australia. Lead singer Vic Fuentes of Pierce the Veil (hereafter referred to as PTV) told an interviewer that it was her suicide that inspired their song "Bulls In The Bronx" (2012).

A couple fans from Australia let us know that their friend had just committed suicide, that she was a big fan and they felt like we would want to know. They even sent us the link to her tumblr page where she had posted this goodbye video and it was like the saddest, most haunting, horrible thing I've ever seen... It was just crazy to see a beautiful 16 year old girl saying things like 'I can't live with myself anymore, I'm so ugly'... she gets bullied at school, everyone hates her and all this stuff and it just blew my mind, I couldn't believe it. So some of that song was inspired by that whole situation, it just got stuck in my head so crazy and it was kind of, you know, for her and for her friends and her family.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> My Chemical Romance, "Welcome to the Black Parade," track 5 on *The Black Parade*, Reprise Records, 2006, compact disc.

<sup>146</sup> Gerard and Mikey Way reference the death of their grandmother both in this song and in "Helena."

<sup>147</sup> Bryant, *Not the Life it Seems*, 155.

<sup>148</sup> Artisan News Service, "Pierce the Veil Haunted by 'Bulls in the Bronx,'" YouTube video, 2:03, December 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUkpDvJ-4Bs>.

The song “Bulls In The Bronx” tells the story of being bullied, drawing from not only Olivia Jane Penpraze’s story but also Vic’s own life. With over seventy-seven million streams on Spotify as of 2022, “Bulls In The Bronx” is PTV’s third most popular song and a fan favorite. Vic and his brother Mike both learned to play guitar from their father who was a Spanish Jazz musician. PTV frequently draws on their Mexican heritage in their music, blending traditional sounds with post-hardcore, creating what is often called their “Mexicore” style. This particular song is one of the best examples of this style due to the extended flamenco guitar interlude leading into the bridge. The interlude stands out from the rest of the song, which is characterized by heavy guitars and screaming typical of the post-hardcore sound. It is not all screaming however, as PTV is known for dramatic style shifts in the vocals, and this song is no exception. It begins with melodic lyricizing that shifts with no warning to screamo. Vic continues this sing-scream, alternating between the two styles throughout the song and occasionally interjecting spoken word. During the bridge, he whispers words in the background that are barely perceptible, but they are direct quotes from Olivia Jane Penpraze’s suicide video.<sup>149</sup> The song ends in death as Vic sings the bridge, “Cause I would rather end it all tonight / If I mean anything to you / I’m sorry but I’ve made up my mind.”<sup>150</sup> The song then launches into the chorus one final time and ends with the haunting words, “I’ve been having this dream that we can fly / So darlin’ close your eyes / Cause you’re about to miss

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<sup>149</sup> While this video is readily available online, for my own mental health I chose not to view, quote, or cite it here.

<sup>150</sup> Pierce the Veil, “Bulls In The Bronx,” track 5 on *Collide with the Sky*, Fearless Records, 2012, compact disc.



everything.”<sup>151</sup> It is worth acknowledging that some fans may be too young to fully understand the intended message behind quoting a young girl’s final words in this song, and perhaps that is why PTV buries the words in the music, making them difficult to decipher.

#### BAND MEMBERS SPEAKING OUT ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

It is no secret that teenagers in general have little respect for authority and often have trouble opening up to parents, teachers, or therapists about their problems. Teenagers who are involved in a fandom look up to the musicians/actors/writers/etc. of their chosen fandom and listen to what they have to say. For this reason, it is important for those creators to be role-models for their fans, and that is a position that emo artists seem to take seriously. Maybe teens will ignore their parents telling them that hurting themselves is not the answer, but if Vic Fuentes tells his fans to stop cutting themselves, many will listen.

And Vic did tell them precisely this on Facebook in the early 2010s, making a status update where he opened up to fans about his past with self harm and offering encouragement, saying

I found out to wait it out that it gets better. I wrote music instead of going to the blade. I found out that my little brother Mike looked up to me and I wanted to change for him. So to the fans that cut or use anything to do with self harm promise me tonight that you will throw away all the blades and go to what you love instead of the blade. I believe you can do it. I will be here if you feel like giving in. I love you guys so much.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Pierce the Veil, “Bulls In The Bronx,” track 5 on *Collide with the Sky*, Fearless Records, 2012, compact disc.

<sup>152</sup>Victor Vincent Fuentes, “So guys this is going to be a serious status. Self harm is a addiction and it serious wether it’s 5 cuts or 100 cuts. I myself have dealt with self harm,” Facebook, 2010-2013, Quoted in We Heart It (@weheartitapp), Pinterest pin, before 2021, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/4NL4sX5>.

A fan post that originated on Facebook shows a picture of Vic where scars from cutting are visible on his left arm. The fan who shared this post on Pinterest captioned it “I just wish I could show my scars so proudly.”<sup>153</sup> The comments on Pinterest are overwhelmingly positive, with many fans sharing stories of how they have stopped self-harming and other fans offering messages of love and support. One fan commented about the picture: “it shows that I’m not alone. It shows that he got through the pain, so maybe I can too. I can’t even explain how much this means to me.”<sup>154</sup> This vulnerability and compassion from their heroes encourages teens by giving them hope and showing them that they are not alone.

I have seen many testimonies in fan communities of band members noticing their fans’ scars at concerts and taking time to go out of their way and offer words of encouragement. ATL’s 2015 song “Kids In The Dark” addresses their young fans who are struggling, reminding them that they are not alone and that they are worthy of love. Its chorus includes the line: “What a shame / Beautiful scars on / Critical veins / We come together / State of the art / We’ll never surrender / The kids in the dark.”<sup>155</sup> A common thread that unites emo bands regardless of their sound is the way that they seem to care about their fans. They recognize that their platform only exists because of their fans, and most do their best to be worthy of it. Tumblr user @hippieslacker shared their story:

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<sup>153</sup> We Heart It (@weheartitapp), Pinterest pin, before 2021, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/4NL4sX5>.

<sup>154</sup> We Heart It (@weheartitapp), Pinterest pin, before 2021, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/4NL4sX5>.

<sup>155</sup> All Time Low, “Kids In The Dark,” track 4 on *Future Hearts*, Hopeless Records, Inc. 2015, compact disc.

Just wanted to tell someone about this. A few years back, I went to an MCR concert. and afterwards we waited outside for hours for mcr to come out, when they did, they were apologizing for being late, and everyone was reaching out their hands to touch them, including me. And I managed to touch Mikey, he reached his hand out and smiled at me, then looked at my wrist and.. you know, I had cut. he frowned, and Gerard called him cause they were getting in the van. He started to walk on, and just before he got in the van, he turned round, as the crowds started to clear, he walked over to me. I was so shocked, and I probably looked like an idiot, he giggled at me and said Why did you do it?\* What?\* I replied, and he pointed at my wrist. I told him the story of me being bullied every day, and my parents hated me. I could see tears begin to form in his eyes and he put his arm round me and told me to stay strong, and that he loved me. Mikey way told me he loved me. he hugged me, and walked back to the van. When he got there, he whispered something in Gerard's ear, Gerard then looked over at me, and called over 'You'll be okay, I promise' Then he smiled, and shut the van door. Whenever I am feeling down, I remember that day.<sup>156</sup>

This is one of many stories shared online about the way emo band members interact with their fans. After seeing stories like this, many fans place band members on a pedestal and believe they can do no wrong. This instinct is understandable but dangerous. Band members are as deeply flawed as everyone else with their own unique struggles. In this story, while Mikey and Gerard are compassionate and empathetic, “you’ll be okay, I promise” is a well-intended reassurance, but it is not mental health counseling and can never take the place of professional help. That said, it is clear from fan testimonies that when these band members offer their fans kindness, it truly does make a difference. Still, the most significant contribution band members can make is to use their power and platform to destigmatize mental health conversations and care, and many do this.

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<sup>156</sup> @hippieslackers, Tumblr, “Just wanted to tell someone about this...” before 2013, Quoted in “zZ” (@ovtcrspace), Pinterest pin, before 2019, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://pin.it/6fwSNFV>.

## THERAPY

Just as they can encourage their fans not to self-harm, emo musicians can also advocate for their fans to reach out and get help when they need it, and teens may be inclined to listen to them. The song “Therapy” by ATL appeared on their third full-length album *Nothing Personal* in 2009 and became an instant fan-favorite. At the time, twenty-one-year-old Alex Gaskarth described it as being about “every kid’s nightmare. People are saying you need help, but all you really want is a hug.”<sup>157</sup> The lyrics were reflective of his reluctance towards therapy with the chorus being “Give me therapy / I’m a walking travesty / But I’m smiling at everything / Therapy, you were never a friend to me / You can keep all your misery.”<sup>158</sup> One particular line is especially self-deprecating: “Arrogant boy, love yourself so no one has to / They’re better off without you / Arrogant boy, cause a scene like you’re supposed to / They’ll fall asleep without you / You’re lucky if your memory remains.”<sup>159</sup> This line struck a chord with fans and is one of the most quoted parts of the song that I have seen online. Over the years, Alex has seen what an effect this song has had on fans, and at concerts he began prefacing the song with a speech encouraging fans who need help to reach out and ask for it.<sup>160</sup> He also sometimes changes the words of that particular line, sometimes posing it as a question rather than a statement: “Are they really better off without you?” On their 2021 tour, now thirty-three

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<sup>157</sup> Emily Avery (@shortiie), Pinterest pin, n.d. Quote from after 2009, Accessed March 3, 2022, <https://pin.it/7LEOO78>.

<sup>158</sup> All Time Low, “Therapy,” track 12 on *Nothing Personal*, Hopeless Records, Inc., 2009, compact disc.

<sup>159</sup> All Time Low, “Therapy,” track 12 on *Nothing Personal*, Hopeless Records, Inc., 2009, compact disc.

<sup>160</sup> t@fuckyeahalexanderalltimelow, Tumblr, “Alex Gaskarth – Therapy Speeches,” c. 2012, Accessed March 2, 2022, <https://fuckyeahalexanderalltimelow.tumblr.com/post/16930432956/alex-gaskarth-therapy-speeches>.

years old, Alex was able to share with fans a more nuanced perspective of therapy, explaining his journey from writing the song to where he is now:

When I wrote this song, it was a song about being a little apprehensive about therapy. I felt like I needed help, I needed to talk to someone, but I didn't wanna feel broken. I didn't wanna be that broken toy. So I didn't wanna like motivate myself to go and do this. I didn't wanna go speak to someone 'cause I was fine...I'm fuckin' fine, you know what I mean? I was like I'm fine. But I wasn't fine. And so I wrote this song. And at the time it was a little bit...it was with a little resentment towards the help that I knew I needed. And as the years have gone on, and I've gotten to talk to so many of you guys about how this song has resonated with you and the experiences you guys have had, it made me think back to how important that was for me to go and seek that help when I needed it. And it's been a lesson as it's gone on and as this song has evolved through the live show, it's been a lesson to me that when I need to reach out, I can reach out, and I have, and that help has been there for me when I've needed it. And so this song over the years has taken on a new meaning for me. This song is about reaching out for help. It's about saying, 'you know what, I recognize that I am not perfect. As a person I am flawed. I have all kinds of things going on in my brain. And some of those things need to be discussed. Some of those things need to be talked about in big formats like this or one on one with a therapist, or whatever it may be.' But I sing this song from a much different place tonight and if this song has ever spoken to you, that means the world to me 'cause when I wrote it, I didn't expect for it to connect with people in any kind of way. So thank you for letting it be a part of your lives the way it's a part of my life.<sup>161</sup>

Over many years of performing this song live, the band has shifted to only performing it acoustically. Oftentimes, the rest of the band leaves the stage, and Alex remains alone onstage with an acoustic guitar and a roomful of fans who know exactly what song is coming, creating a really intimate moment that is powerful for this song. In a way, it mimics therapy itself. Even though there are hundreds of people in the crowd, each person feels as though Alex is speaking and singing directly to them, and the one-on-one feeling is raw and emotional. Without the rest of the band onstage, Alex is exposed in the same way one would be if they were talking to their therapist.

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<sup>161</sup> gravestoned, "All Time Low – Therapy (Live/Speech) 2021 Soundmind Music Festival Ventura CA," YouTube video, 0:00, May 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keEIfyNKTWU>.

## THE SUICIDE SIGN

In 2012, Carlos Enrique Navarro, a long-time member of the scene known as “The Merch Guy” who tours with bands developed a photo series based around a sign he created. The sign is simple: a piece of cardboard with tape all across it and the words written in Sharpie: “Suicide does not end the chances of life getting worse. Suicide eliminates the possibility of it ever getting better.”<sup>162</sup> Utilizing the friends and connections that he made over years of touring, Carlos created a black and white photo series of musicians, techs, photographers, friends, and various others holding the sign. This project was effective because of the fact that so many young people saw their heroes and idols holding the sign, seemingly speaking directly to them. A few of the musicians photographed include Spencer Chamberlain of Underoath, Jenna McDougall of Tonight Alive, Vic Fuentes of PTV, Aaron Pauley and Phil Manansala of Of Mice & Men, Oliver Sykes and Jordan Fish of Bring Me the Horizon, Kellin Quinn of Sleeping with Sirens, Parker Cannon of The Story So Far, Alex Gaskarth of ATL, Ryan Seaman of Falling in Reverse, Andy Biersack of Black Veil Brides, and dozens more. When he shares each picture on the Instagram account @thesuicidesign, Carlos also shares the story behind how he met the person and what prompted them to take the picture. Each story is unique and detailed. Carlos never picks a person simply because they are famous (in fact, he has photographed homeless people who were interested in being a part of his project). He makes sure that their values align with the project and that the picture would be a

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<sup>162</sup> The Suicide Sign (@thesuicidesign), 2013, “I’ve gotten lots of request for just a photo of the #suicide sign so here you guys go. The sign is made out of cardboard but to improve the legibility of it I decided to put tape on it...” Instagram photo, July 19, 2013, Accessed March 1, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/b9PMsJzT\\_5/?utm\\_medium=share\\_sheet](https://www.instagram.com/p/b9PMsJzT_5/?utm_medium=share_sheet).

meaningful addition. The emo fan reception was overwhelmingly positive, and the photographs have been spread and discussed throughout many online emo communities. One fan commented on the Instagram post of Alex holding the sign: “this post will forever give me strength. that band...has given me so much hope and light when I needed it most...they care more about fans and what happens to them more than any band I’ve ever seen. I know they won’t ever stop.”<sup>163</sup> Another comment on the picture of Vic reads: “I was scrolling through this account because this sign, along with the people holding it, has helped me get through a lot and seeing them makes me a lot happier. I just found this one of Vic and I thought about how he shared his self-harm story with his fans. He’s very relatable for me, and I love seeing this one picture.”<sup>164</sup> The very real impact of this sign is evident throughout all of the comments but especially this one on Oliver’s picture: “this sign is the thing that made me keep on walking past the train tracks I cross walking home from school.”<sup>165</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is impossible to measure the overall impact of emo; it may save some lives while related toxicity and negativity found in some online communities arguably

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<sup>163</sup> alexis (@alexis.marine), c. November 18, 2015, commented on The Suicide Sign (@thesuicidesign), 2013, “Alex Gaskarth. As I was looking through all the photos I’ve posted so far I noticed something, that I hadn’t posted Alex’s...” Instagram photo, September 30, 2013, Accessed March 1, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/e4cA9LTT2w/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link..](https://www.instagram.com/p/e4cA9LTT2w/?utm_medium=copy_link..)

<sup>164</sup> bri (@b.brianna.a), c. June 10, 2015, commented on The Suicide Sign (@thesuicidesign), 2013, “Vic Fuentes. I met Vic on the Vans Warped Tour 2012. Ever since then for one reason or another I see Vic at least once every 2 months...” Instagram photo, April 29, 2013, Accessed March 1, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/YtIMUQzT9j/?utm\\_medium=share\\_sheet](https://www.instagram.com/p/YtIMUQzT9j/?utm_medium=share_sheet).

<sup>165</sup> your daily vegan recipes (@ydveganrecipes), c. November 5, 2014, commented on The Suicide Sign (@thesuicidesign), 2013, “Oliver Scott Sykes. The story behind this photo is nothing crazy but I feel is unique. Unlike most of the previous photos I have taken and posted...” Instagram photo, July 21, 2013, Accessed March 1, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/a2gcW\\_zT\\_E/?utm\\_medium=share\\_sheet](https://www.instagram.com/p/a2gcW_zT_E/?utm_medium=share_sheet).

endangers others. And how can the value of human lives be compared? What is potentially a triggering environment or an echo chamber of mental anguish for some is a supportive and healing community for others. The trouble with the accessibility of online community is that it is difficult for a fan to remove themselves even if they know it is harmful to them. Emo music itself can be cathartic or it can be something to wallow in when one is depressed. The lyrics speak to mental illness because the musicians have also struggled, and they are doing their best to help. Even though there is little agreement on the definition of emo, there is no doubt that emo and mental illness go hand in hand.



## CHAPTER 5

### "GIVE 'EM HELL, KID": CONCLUSION

The power of the internet in modern society is unparalleled. It dictates popular culture and has taken over mass media. Its potential to connect people from all over the world has served to create every imaginable type of niche subculture. There is room for every voice on the internet, which in some cases can lead to a welcoming sense of community but in other cases can produce a toxic environment in constant conflict. The online emo culture occupies both of these extremes and the more moderate spaces between them. As one of the first internet musical subcultures, the emo community began as a welcome escape from the real world and the stressors of school and home. Fans began with one shared interest—music—and then realized they had so much more in common as they opened up about their personal lives. The positivity of these communities attracted more and more people, but that in turn introduced chaos into the emo fandom. Each fan brought their own opinions about what the music and the community meant to them, resulting in the variety of definitions and descriptions I have presented here. Many fans I am sure would disagree with the way I have described emo, but that disagreement is the hallmark of emo and should be embraced rather than discouraged. Although disagreement can sow chaos and tension, it can also lead to the formation of many small intimate fandom communities. Fandom is the intersection of interests, identity, creativity, and community, and the internet has allowed fandom to flourish like it never has before. While productive fandom practices such as fan fiction and cover bands precede the internet, online fandom community created a space where productive fandom could be more interactive with the sharing of ideas and feedback. The

open dialogue fostered online informs the fan fiction that creators write by revealing what things are important to the fandom, such as representation. The internet also provides an opportunity for the artists to be more involved in their fandom. They can hear cover bands play their music, enjoy fan art, understand the values and the particular struggles of their fans, and offer encouragement or mental health resources.

Understanding early online fandoms like emo is key to understanding internet cultures of today. Emo music and its fan community held incredible power over an entire generation of young people. That generation has now reached adulthood, and they are still active in online community, shaping the internet for the future. Social media provides a way of documenting what may seem mundane but could provide valuable social and historical context to future generations. Even though my work is situated within only the past two decades, the culture revealed by the online communities I have examined is vastly different from today's culture in ways such as dress, slang, and values. Kelly Logan describes social media, and Tumblr specifically, as "a growing organism that reflects the views and interests of the people. Thus, what it looks like and exhibits will vary based on the time period, current events, and the opinions of the viewers."<sup>166</sup> However, these platforms do more than simply document or preserve culture. They also participate in creating culture. Posts that go viral on a social media platform do not only exist on that platform. They become part of a collective consciousness and are discussed

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<sup>166</sup> Kelly Logan, "Tumblr: An Everyday Archive," In *Media and the Archive: Motions and Transformations*, ed. by Viola Lasmana, Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2017, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/media-and-archive/tumblr-an-everyday-archive-by-kelly-logan?path=the-everyday-archive>.

at the dinner table, made into skits on Saturday Night Live, or turned into advertising campaigns for a company.

The internet enabled distinct subcultures to build communities based on shared interests and passions. Emo online communities hold valuable discourse on what emo music is and what issues are important to emo fans. It has created an outlet for participatory fandom as well as dialogue centering around matters of mental health. While the emo fandom was one of the earliest musical subcultures to engage in online community, the internet has since grown exponentially and there are a variety of musical subcultures deserving of future study.

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