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WOMS 101.2

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Final Research Project: Feminist Intervention

Make America Emo

(But Not Again – Let's Redefine It and Avoid the Misogyny and Hegemonic Masculinity of Its Past, Please and Thank You)

Emo music has been controversial since its inception in the mid 80s – it was too soft and emotional for hardcore fans, but it was still a bit too left-of-center for lovers of mainstream pop. As the genre gained popularity with teens in the mid-2000s thanks to bands like My Chemical Romance and Taking Back Sunday, a subculture emerged in which young men began expressing more emotions than societal norms typically allow. This is a scene of music that I fell in love with as a young teenager, and that I am still very connected to. I love the rawness and openness of the music. However, upon learning about toxic masculinity in this class, I have viewed this music and its scene in a new light; research indicates that while young emo men tout themselves as subverting gender norms, their homoerotic behaviors, emphasis on violence, and claims of being victimized actually reinforce hegemonic masculinity.

First things first: what *is* emo? The emo subculture first emerged in the mid 1980s, and the word "emo" was short for "emotive hardcore" (Allooh, Rummell, & Levant, 2013, p. 22). However, unlike the punk and hardcore bands of the time, emo lyrical content dealt with personal matters and relationships rather than politics. The scene evolved over time, and especially in the early 2000s the term "started to be applied to bands that weren't punk, to fashion trends, to sad-eyed kids in the back of the back of the class," yet many did not wear the emo label with pride – they rejected it "while claiming ownership of it" (de Boise, 2014, p. 226). This 2000s wave of emo (which blurred with the genre of pop-punk) is the one I will be discussing in this paper. This music and culture was largely disseminated across the internet, especially with social platforms like MySpace. The journal articles I studied use bands like The All-American Rejects, Hawthorne Heights, Fall Out Boy, Panic! at the Disco, Dashboard Confessional and Jimmy Eat World as examples. The genre has been mostly popular with white

teenage males living in suburban areas, and it has become connotative of self-harm and self-pity (226). The current emo scene is slightly modified, but I will discuss that later.

On the outset, it may appear that there are multiple variables of emo that question the gender binary. Emo fashion consists of tight-fitting t-shirts, skinny jeans and skater shoes, often in black or bright colors (especially pink and purple). It is not unusual for men to wear girl's or women's skinny jeans, and males sometimes wear eyeliner and nail polish; young men also wear their hair long, with side-swept bangs covering their eyes, sometimes dying it black (Alooh et al., 2013, p. 23). These styles are generally associated with femininity, but both emo fans and musicians subscribe to this aesthetic, which seems to be inspired by the Goth subculture.

While these patterns in fashion indicate rejections of typical heteronormative masculine styles, arguably the most radically progressive element of emo is its rejection of restrictive emotionality for men. Scholar Aaron P. Anastasi is one of the supporters who has made the claim that emo music provides a healthy and positive outlet for young men to express their emotions (Anastasi, 2005, p. 303). Whereas society expects men to be stoic and unreactive, emo boys can be seen crying as they sing every emotional lyric back to singer Chris Carrabba at a MTV Dashboard Confessional concert taping (Ryalls, 2013, p. 87). In a focus group of college students, one said, "I don't think 'emo' people are clinically depressed as society believes them to be, but they love deeper, cry harder, laugh louder because they are not afraid of their emotions" (Alooh, 2013, p. 27). These are men who are unafraid to show they are in touch with their feelings while living in a society that condemns and ridicules emotional men as womanly.

As a teenage girl, this subculture appealed to me because I felt that the music was catchy enough to sing along to, and it felt more genuine than the pop music I was hearing on the radio. When I was feeling down and vulnerable, I found solace in this music, especially when it dealt

with themes of not fitting in. I was also enamored with how men in these emo bands seemed to challenge societal norms – it felt rebellious, exciting and progressive. As discussed in the film we watched in class, *Tough Guise 2*, American boys are taught to master the "tough guise" of masculinity, burying their vulnerabilities within themselves and choosing to resolve disputes with violence. I loved how the emo bands put their entire hearts on display – but as I grew older (and especially after taking this class), I realized that many of these men were not nearly as non-conforming as they made themselves out to be.

The leading issue that dismantles all the positive aspects of emo is that many of these men play the victim and display great amounts of violence towards women (and themselves) in their lyrics, which merely affirms hegemonic masculinity. Instead of taking responsibility for their emotions, there is a trend of male emo songwriters placing the blame for their anxieties and mental suffering on the women they have been romantically involved with. De Boise explains this sentiment with songs like Hawthorne Heights' *Ohio is for Lovers*, where the lead singer cries, "You know you do, you kill me well. You like it too, and I can tell. You never stop until my final breath is gone" (2014, p. 233). In the midst of heartbreak, it is not uncommon for emos to make threats like Funeral for a Friend in the song *She Drove me to Daytime Television*, "Break my heart and break my hands and let me down. I want to snap your neck in two" (2014, p. 235). That is a powerful visual, but it is a sickeningly graphic and misogynistic one. Maybe these men are emotional, but it is not in a warm, sentimental way that does anything to defy gender norms. This troublesome situation is heightened by bands that cast themselves as lonely boys looking for love while women are maliciously using them for sex. De Boise demonstrates this with Brand New's *Sic Transit Gloria…Glory Fades* ("He is the lamb, she is the slaughter. She's moving way too fast and all he wanted was to hold her") and even Panic! at the Disco's beloved *I Write Sins*

not Tragedies (“What a shame the poor groom’s bride is a whore”) [2014, p. 236]. The Panic! example is also problematic in that the leading lady is not even referred to as simply the “bride” – she is deemed “the poor groom’s bride,” implying she belongs to him and is the sole reason for his misfortune and unhappiness.

Additionally, there is a stereotype that all those who identify as emo are suicidal and self-harming. This is not inherent to emo culture, but these expectations indeed stem from a trend of lyrics about self-inflicted violence, and young men would use this to assert their masculinity in toxic manners. Emily Ryalls defines this as reflexive sadomasochism. She writes that hegemonic masculinity is largely based on the ability to withstand pain, so “by exhibiting – indeed bragging about – their self-harm, emos concomitantly re-assert their masculinity while representing their white male angst in corporeal terms” (2013, p. 94). She explains that these boys will cut their wrists and show them off as symbol of their manliness and toughness, as well as proof of their victimization and disempowerment. They revel in sharing these stories with each other in online forums; they take pleasure in having scared their teachers (2013, p. 94). They see this as masculine.

Even homosexual acts performed in the emo community are manipulated to further hegemonic masculinities. In forums like Emocorner, boys explain that they are kissing each other because they “’know girls think it’s hot’” and they are trying to gain those girls’ attentions, “so the progressive potential of queering, which ideally serves to disrupt heteronormative constructions, is lost” (Ryalls, 2013, p. 88); emo is not as forward-thinking as it may seem at its outset. Non-binary measures are taken, but they are simply used as another form of reaching ends established by the gender binary and hegemonic masculinity.

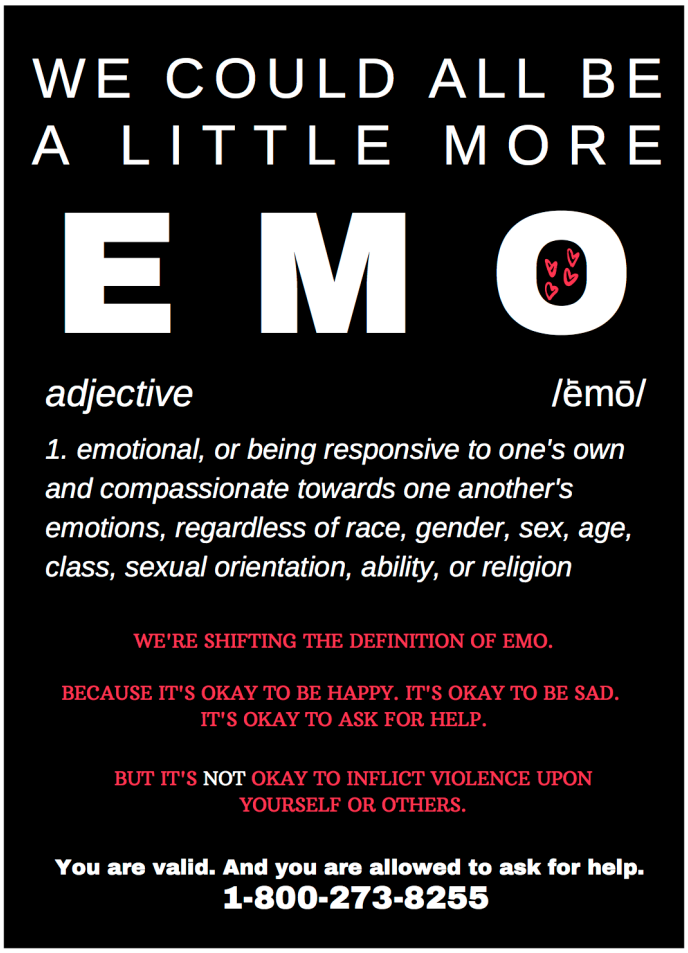
Nevertheless, there is hope, as in my opinion, the current emo scene is much different from the one that perpetuated toxic masculinity back in the mid 2000s despite portraying itself as progressive. Many fans have become more aware of the toxicity, and the bands have either adapted and grown, or been left in the dust. For example, Brendon Urie from Panic! at the Disco came out as pansexual, and the band celebrates inclusivity of all kinds without demeaning women. At live shows during the song *Girls/Girls/Boys*, fans will hold up paper rainbow hearts in honor of equality for the LGBTQ+ community, emphasizing the lyrics in the chorus, "Love is not a choice." On the flip side, Jesse Lacey of Brand New was shunned from the scene after revelations that he had committed sexual assault against underage girls. Newer pop-punk/emo bands like With Confidence promote positivity and sing about breakups without placing the blame on anyone. On their song *Pâquerette (Without Me)*, the singer unironically wishes his ex well and croons, "I hope you're better off without me, in your bed and sleeping soundly."

This is the emo community I love and am proud to identify with. Sonically, it is similar to the music of the past, but attitudes and lyrics have definitely changed and improved. The scene is still lacking racial diversity, and I would love to see more female representation on stage, but we are moving in the right direction. I highlight this scene and the positive aspects of it on my weekly college radio show on 90.5 FM KSJS, but I could also disseminate information with a flier that outlines a new definition of emo, one that focuses on showing compassion through raw emotion in music.

Emo provides an outlet for people to become comfortable with their emotions, and the changes in the scene make me feel better about promoting it. As you can see on the flier I have attached, I created a definition for "emo" in the way I view it. I want people to know that it is okay to feel vulnerable, and that recognizing one's own emotions and sharing them with another

human being is a beautiful thing. This is empathy. I included the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline so people have a resource if they choose to act upon emotional distress, which is a valiant thing to do. I would hang this flier up at emo concerts and festivals like Warped Tour (especially in the men's bathrooms), and maybe even around college campuses.

Emo has been used as a vehicle for enacting hegemonic masculinity, but (as idealistic as it sounds) I believe it can instead be a means for allowing people of all backgrounds to celebrate freedom from restrictive emotionality.



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