

**“I’m Not Okay (I Promise)”: Analyzing the 2000s Emo Moral Panic and Its Artistic
and Cultural Implications**

Tina Tu

The University of Toronto

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“Mom, it’s not a phase!”

—An emo kid circa the 2000s, probably

If you were an awkward and sentimental teenager in the 2000s—or a teenager *at all*—you will never forget the feeling of losing sleep at 3 a.m., headphones blasting “Welcome to the Black Parade”. The music was your last breath of oxygen in a bleak, suffocating world, which your parents could not understand, instead accusing your beloved bands of making you mentally ill. The rise of mainstream emo music in the 2000s provoked intense backlash from concerned parents and the melodramatic media, who concluded that it is the cause of depression and self-harm among teenagers. As a belated response, this paper will examine both quantitative and qualitative evidence and debate whether emo music offers a valid venue for teenagers to process their mental health issues and be outspoken about their struggles, or it romanticizes mental illnesses by symbolizing them with appealing visuals and phrasing these issues poetically.

Emo, short for “emotional hardcore”, is a music genre turning into a full-fledged subculture in the 2000s (Garland 2018). Inspired by the ‘80s hardcore punk, emo inherited its fast tempo, distorted guitar, declamatory vocal style, and loud percussion, but opens avenues for musicians to express sentiments other than anger and aggression.

In 2007, the tragic suicide of Hannah Bond, a 13-year-old British girl, made parents all over the U.K. clutch their pearls. Her coroner suggested the reason was her being an “aficionado of the emo fad”, as reported by the U.K.’s *The Daily Mail* and *The Times*, two leading right-wing newspapers. *The Daily Mail*’s issue also features pathos-driven interviews of parents of Hannah and another teenager who identified as emo, condemning bands like My Chemical Romance for the toxic influence on their children.

It is not surprising that protective parents would fall for such crude yet sentimentally manipulative media discourse. Tabloids are not dependable, well-rounded sources of

information (Garland 2018), and the media tends to sensationalize youth culture to address broader societal anxieties and exert social control, often through the lens of moral panic (Phillipov 2009). Newspapers like *The Daily Mail* did not conduct thorough research into the root of young people's deteriorating mental health; instead, they blamed teenage deviance on emo music, fragmentizing larger-scale social issues into plain and simple music consumption. Their lack of knowledge of emo music culture is also astonishing—aside from the preposterous claim that emo is a subset of goth (Sands 2006), they reduced a rich, complex community constructed by talented musicians and devoted fans into symbols of black eyeliner and cuts on emo's wrists.

However, contrary to the media and parents' belief that emo is a gateway to mental illness, fans have stated time and again that emo music has helped them cope with stress and depression that had existed before they were exposed to it (Hill 2011, 149). Hill also analyzed fan letters submitted to *Kerrang!* magazine and conducted interviews with My Chemical Romance fans, pointing out that young people are drawn to emo either as a means of establishing a distinct identity among their peers through alternative aesthetics or as a form of “self-medicating music therapy.”

Apart from testimonials from emo music fans, research in psychology has proven that music provides a valid therapeutic release for mental stress (“Music Therapy”). Although emo lovers do not consume music in a clinical setting, their engagement with the genre serves still as a potent form of self-regulation and emotional release. As one My Chemical Romance fan stated, “Feeling someone else's pain can help you get over your own” (Hill 2011, 148), illustrating the solidarity and healing power that young people find in emo music.

The primary reason emo music resonates with young people is their dissatisfaction with various aspects of their lives. Cognitive dissonance occurs when a person's beliefs and actions contradict, or when they hold two conflicting beliefs, resulting in stress and discomfort (Villines 2024). Teenagers and young adults experience cognitive dissonance more frequently and intensely than older individuals because their unrefined, idealistic worldviews clash more harshly with the complexities of society. Limited by their age, experience, and social status, they often feel powerless to shape the world into the ideals they envision. For instance, they learned through literature and cultural narratives that genuineness and kindness lead to friendships, yet the intricate power dynamics of school often prove far more challenging, leading to experiences of bullying and alienation. This angst and frustration are the natural byproducts of their rite of passage.

To parents, the “sin” that emo music has committed, is turning their perfect little angels into gloomy, antisocial teenagers; however, this is also the easiest misconception to debunk. Studies from Taylor (2018), Baker and Bor (2008), and Lacourse, Claes, and Villeneuve (2001) established only the statistical correlation between the state of teenagers' mental health and their heavy music (e.g., heavy metal, emo, etc.) consumption. Correlation and causality are vastly different¹—in this case, there are omitted variables, such as dysfunctional families or the rising unemployment rate, affecting *both* the young generation's mental health and their music preferences, thus a direct causal relationship cannot be established.

¹ To illustrate the omitted variable bias: In summer, both ice cream sales and the number of drowning incidents increase, but we cannot conclude that ice cream causes drowning; rather, it is the hot weather that leads to both outcomes.

Just as misconceptions about the impact of emo music stem from a lack of understanding, so too do misunderstandings of its symbolic elements. In Walser's (2015) *Running with The Devil* (154), the frequent use of Satanic symbols and religious myths by heavy metal musicians is often perceived by non-metal fans as devil-worship, due to their failure to grasp the postmodern ideologies behind the lyrics. The seemingly dark and threatening religious references are not to be taken literally; rather, they are given new meanings in a modern context, demonstrating power struggles and social anxieties through symbolic borrowings from history.

Likewise, the pain, suffering, underworld, and suicide depicted in emo should be interpreted symbolically, reflecting the artists' personal struggles with these themes. Take My Chemical Romance's concept album, *The Black Parade*, as an example. Listeners join the main character, "The Patient", in this rock opera detailing his last moments on Earth, during which flashes of the past appear before his eyes (Martin 2006), and the chaotic narratives throughout the album can be seen as him slipping into psychosis and losing senses of reality. The painful struggles he faced make him cynical of the life he once had, abandoning any hope of fighting to keep living. However, eventually, in a revelation of life's meaning, he delivers his "Famous Last Words": "I am not afraid to keep on living/I am not afraid to walk this world alone." Although he is at the last stage of life, he wants the listeners to correct mistakes when they can and snap out of self-pity.

Symbols and euphemisms in the album include substance use, alcoholism, depression, self-harm, and cannibalism, none of which should be taken at face value. The fourth track, "The Sharpest Lives", details the reckless and self-destructive life The Patient once led. For instance, substance use and alcoholism in "I've really been on a bender, and it shows" are not

merely about the actions themselves, but symbolize an attempt to escape pain or cope with emptiness. Similarly, “corroding like a beast in repose” evokes a picture of physical decay, but it metaphorically conveys emotional stagnation and the toll of a destructive lifestyle. The song is blunt criticism that My Chemical Romance had for those who cope with their mental health struggles at the cost of their health and sanity, delivered graphically and poetically.

The album’s visuals are just as striking as the lyrics, using historical symbols of death to deliver a modern, emotionally resonant message. In the music video for “Welcome to the Black Parade”, the process of The Patient’s acceptance into the underworld is portrayed as a carnivalesque parade. The float, decorated with black ribbons and red roses, is the stage where the band performs; behind is a large crowd of people dressed in medieval and Victorian-inspired attire, walking slowly and emotionlessly toward the patient. The Black Parade takes place in the surreal realm between the human world and the underworld, and the visuals are theatrical, macabre, and somber, with an over-arching motif of death, which both enhances and contradicts the passionate singing repeating the lyrics in the end “We’ll carry on”. Although The Patient’s life ends, the band wants every listener to preserve resilience in the face of despair and keep on living. Symbols of mortality in this video are repurposed to create both a sense of fear and reflection on looming death through traditional imagery, while also inspiring strength and continuity in a contemporary context.

The witch-hunt against emo musicians and fans was gruesome; however, the ideology behind the emo moral panic is more alarming than the panic itself. Parents and society believe that emo music is disastrous to young people’s minds because it is often pessimistic, emotionally expressive, and addresses heavy topics like mental health. They doubted any constructive outcome could be generated from the teenagers’ obsession with emo, therefore

they went so far as to deny the validity of the existence of the music genre. In their view, emo music and getting in touch with the community is the gateway drug to self-harm and suicide, with a blatant omission of the essence of music and art being subjective and open to interpretation.

I argue that emo music is not and should not be treated as neither a solution to well-being nor the slippery slope to the deterioration of mental health. As Oscar Wilde, a scholar of Aestheticism, aptly pointed out in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, “All art is quite useless”, art exists for the sake of its beauty alone. As a paramount form of art, music should be returned to its artistic values, and no purposeful functionality should be forced onto it. Society’s demand for music to be utilitarian will ultimately stifle creativity, placing undue pressure on individual artists and persecuting them for holding views outside the mainstream. Consider the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell’s *1984*—a world where music is highly regulated and only allowed to convey politically correct messages would be a dreadful place.

In conclusion, the moral panic surrounding emo music in the 2000s reveals much more about society's discomfort with youth culture than it does about music itself. Emo music, often misunderstood and misrepresented, became a scapegoat for the complexity of teenage mental health struggles. For young fans, it served as a vital outlet for self-expression and emotional release, helping them restore their peace of mind during the coming-of-age stage of life.

The key is in understanding that the line between expression and harm is not as clear-cut as some would argue. Emo music did not create mental illness, nor did it glorify suffering—it provided a voice for those who felt silenced. By returning emo to its artistic value, free from the moral judgments of its critics, we can better appreciate its role in fostering a sense of belonging and resilience.

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