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# Exploring Dress and Behavior of the Emo Subculture

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**Exploring Dress and Behavior of the Emo Subculture**

A Thesis  
Presented To  
The Academic Faculty

By

Kaci Schmitt

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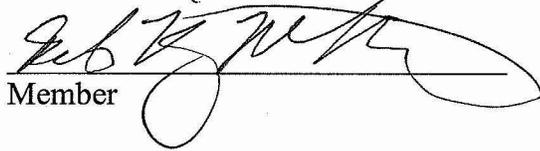
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## Introduction

*“To me, emo represents what I wish I could have looked like before I realized it was cool, it was okay, it was acceptable to be different. To not wear Abercrombie and Fitch. To not have to hide behind something else that it seemed like everyone else liked and that made me look so ordinary. To be okay with showing my emotions and listening to music that beat them out of me so hard sometimes it felt like I couldn’t breathe because it just [understood] me. My friends called me emo and sensitive at school...and I didn’t really like it, but that’s okay. I’m okay because I’m emotional.” – George<sup>1</sup>, age 18*

In a culture equally fascinated with creating and refuting labels<sup>2</sup>, the emo kid is a phenomenon that resists total and/or absolute identification, presenting multiple contradictions while simultaneously consisting of participants whom other individuals could immediately identify as emo. The emo subculture, whose moniker is derived from “emotional hardcore,” or “emo-core,” a sub-genre of punk music that came into existence in the mid-1980s, consists of male and female youths transgressing beyond standard dress and expectations, often presenting an androgynous look as male and female “emo kids” share similar hair- and clothing styles. Though not specifically queer in gendered and/or sexual identification or orientation, the term “emo,” like the term “queer,” resists definition and is consistently in flux. Unique to emo, though, is the reason *why* it a definition that others resist identifying with, even if they do not resist actually being members of the subculture. As I have discovered after intense research, questioning, observations, and interviews of emo kids, the reasons why the term “emo” is so refuted by the emo kids is complicated and multifaceted, which I will explain further in the section entitled “Disowning ‘Emo.’” Despite their resistance to identification as emo

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewed individuals’ names have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen T. Russell, Thomas J. Clarke, and Justin Clary’s “Are Teens ‘Post-Gay’? Contemporary Adolescents’ Sexual Identity Labels.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 38.7 (2009): 884-890, as an example of the fluidity of identities in current culture, specifically sexual identities.

kids, it is fairly easy to recognize a young person—typically a teenager, although sometimes reaching beyond into early adulthood—who fits the classification of emo kid.

Brian M. Peters describes emo boys as “the mods of the millennium: black hair; sweeping, dramatic bangs; heavy eyeliner [“guyliner”], and tailored clothing.”<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-one-year-old Bailey, who has equal passions for anime and Eastern theology and has fluctuated between both goth and emo styles, explained emo to me as follows:

Emo is kind of like gothic-light....To me, emo means not knowing how to deal with the large amount of emotions that rage through adolescent and teenage bodies so the emo-subscribing teens act as if they have no place in the world....They just don't know where they fit in the world and don't know how to deal with that lack of connection.

Though often portrayed as “too cool to care,” the emo kids certainly place importance on image. Accompanying images found online through a Google search of “emo kid” provides an indication of not only the emo style of the ambiguously-gendered emo kid in the picture, but also the mainstream reaction to emo kids.<sup>4</sup> Andy Greenwald notes in his *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* that emo kids tend to be middle class and white. They are likely to have the necessary components in their lives to have ample opportunities to have money to stand in the lunch line and food on the table after school, graduate from high school, and attend college. Therefore, what does concern them are these “problems” that Greenwald mentions—problems that are emotions amplified for the typical teenager, problems that are sung about in songs with lyrics such as “We’re not twenty-one/But the sooner we are/The sooner the fun will begin” (Dashboard Confessional’s “The Swiss Army Romance”). This song, by one of

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<sup>3</sup> Brian M Peters. “Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of Masculinity.” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7.2 (2010): 7.2, 129-146, 129.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A.

emo's notables, Chris Carraba of Dashboard Confessional, also provides insight into just who these emo kids are: *kids*, not even twenty-one years old in the song's lyrics.

Emo kids—both males and females—are considered emotionally sensitive and brooding, more so in particular than the average adolescent. In this way, emo offers a space for the emotional release of androgynously-dressed, and sometimes androgynously-behaving, individuals whom Peters describes as “those of us who find ourselves either negated or rejected [by the mainstream].”<sup>5</sup> In choosing to eschew typical standardized notions of masculinity in particular, the emo males find themselves in a safe space to dress alike and to interact with one another in ways that are not typically found within all subcultural groups of teenagers and young adults. Because they all participate in society differently than those not in the subculture, they gain social acceptance among one another, or, as Peters puts it, “the art of crafting oneself to be shunned means that the flip side is acceptance within the desired subcultural space.”<sup>6</sup>

I first became interested in this research topic because, as a teacher of adolescents, I have a natural interest in and care for the teenage experience, the coming-of-age process that is documented time and again in novels such as Stephen Chbosky's book *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which is a favorite and widely-read novel among emo kids. I found this subculture, which is comprised of mostly middle-class teenagers and young adults, to be interesting for several reasons, including the common refusal to identify as emo, which I will also address in the section entitled “Disowning ‘Emo.’” I believed that its contradictions and complications were worth exploring, particularly because American Studies does not currently have much in the literature about emo kids.

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<sup>5</sup> Brian M Peters. “Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of Masculinity.” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7.2 (2010): 7.2, 129-146. 139.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

In addition, I found the emo subculture's subtle but distinct forms of gender-bending intriguing. While they are certainly not gender-bending in a way that indicates transsexual or transgendered identity, a distinctly androgynous look is to be found within the subculture. The emo subculture was prevalent in both my high school (between the years of 2002-2006) and in the middle and high schools where I completed my student teaching in 2009, and it can be found elsewhere in American high school and college campus today. What was it about this subculture that allowed for boys to dress so androgynously that it both bordered on femininity and eschewed traditional masculinity to the point where, while observing these individuals in a public gathering place, I could not immediately and definitively ascertain certain individuals' gender(s)? What did it mean that the individuals, particularly the males, participated in this type of dress and behavior?

As my research continued, I began to realize that while this form of androgyny was certainly prevalent and one of the more interesting components of the emo subculture, equally fascinating (and surprising) was emo's resistance to identity in general, whether as a fixed form or as an individual's—or even entire group's. That is, most kids who appear “emo” are not willing to identify as emo. Though I will consistently refer to these individuals in the subculture as “emo kids,” I would like to address that this is simply the most appropriate term allotted for these individuals, even though many would resist the term and would necessarily refer to one another as such. Because a distinct style, behavior, and musical interest is present within this subculture, one that all of my interviewees agreed upon, it seems to be the most fitting and organized way within which to refer to these individuals. Care must be taken to remember that, like

all persons, these individuals are unique and differ from one another in addition to the rest of society, and that therefore can complicate understandings of these people as members of a distinct group. Before I explain the contents of my research, which consisted of field research of emo kids in subcultural hangouts and in-depth interviews of 10 emo kids (and those who claim to be “former” emo kids), an introduction of the history of emo proves necessary so as to establish a background for the reader.

### **Emo Music History**

To the emo kid, musical taste trumps all else in discerning potential friendships and in assessing an individual’s coolness. This is perhaps troubling in a psychological sense because membership, or acceptance, often is extended to others based upon surface similarities, as well as similarities beyond the individual’s direct control, such as his or her socioeconomic classification. Musical taste does not exist in a vacuum, but is instead developed and encouraged by many social and individual factors. It is, however, a primary method of including and excluding among many subcultures, with emo certainly being both excluded by others (including the emo kids themselves) who laugh at its silliness or femininity and by the emo kids who include those who wear the same band tees and attend the same concerts.

Emo kids all have one crucial characteristic in common: they are all drawn into the emo subculture by their love of music. The connection between the emotions and instances of their lives and the music speaks that to them is undeniable for teenagers in general, but for the emo subculture in particular. Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* shows the relevance of music and literature to high school student Charlie’s

and his friends' lives and has received wide support throughout the emo subculture. Though emo was not quite at its peak during the publication date of 1999 (and in the, presumably, years prior that Chbosky was writing the novel) it had been in the periphery, evolving from hardcore punk since the mid-1980s. Though this book was likely not intended solely for teenage emo youth readers, their own lives and obsession with music seems to parallel the focus on music for the characters in the novel.

Formerly a private space not present in the mainstream, emo initially grew out of the hardcore punk music genre (abbreviated to "hardcore") during the mid-1980s, reaching its peak in the summer of 2002. According to the 2006 documentary *American Hardcore*, the hardcore genre emerged out of "a bad economy, inflation, change of administration. [The election in 1980 of Ronald] Reagan was the kind of antithesis or the reaction, a whole new, like a paradigm shift. There was a lot of concern of, you know, what might that mean in terms of all kinds of issues: freedom of speech, repression, and civil liberties, and that was sort of that era."<sup>7</sup> The anger represented within hardcore is further expressed in the opening commentary of the film by lead vocalist and guitar player Vic Bondi of the Chicago-based band Articles of Faith:

In the early '80s there was a sense of reestablishing the order: the white man, the Ronald Reagan white man order, is coming back. You know, you had that wimp Jimmy Carter talking about peace and human rights and all this other shit. And you had you know the feminists and the Negros and they're all getting uppity on us, right? So we're gonna reinstitute order here, right, and so the whole country goes into this, this really puerile '50s fantasy where they're dressing in these cardigan sweaters and we were just like fuck you. Fuck you. Not us. You know, you can take that and shove it up your ass.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *American Hardcore: The History of American Punk Rock 1980-1986*. DVD. Directed by Paul Rachman. 2006; United States: Sony Classics, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Andy Greenwald explains in *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* that early 1980s Washington, D.C.-based band “Minor Threat had represented hardcore.”<sup>9</sup> Punkopedia describes Minor Threat as a “short-lived...[but] strong influence on the hardcore punk music scene in the United States.”<sup>10</sup> Punkopedia further explains that “Minor Threat set the standard for many hardcore bands in the 1980s and 1990s... [differentiating themselves because] they produced short, astonishingly fast songs, eventually with high production quality, which at the time was lacking in most punk and alternative rock.”<sup>11</sup> They were further influential in the emo scene because their song “Straight Edge” is considered the impetus for the entire straight edge movement, which I will discuss more in “Straight Edge (SxE).” The website for the *American Hardcore* DVD describes the eventual influence of hardcore, and Minor Threat, on music that would follow it: “Generally unheralded at the time, the early ‘80s hardcore punk rock scene gave birth to much of the rock music and culture that followed. There would be no Nirvana, Beastie Boys, or Red Hot Chili Peppers were it not for hardcore hands such as Black Flag, Bad Brains, and Minor Threat.”<sup>12</sup>

Although it originated in punk, “emo” or “emocore” bands opposed hardcore punk’s angry, loud, political messages, creating an apolitical, softer style of music, focusing on the emotional drama and conflicts of, generally speaking, the white, middle-class youth. Dick Hebdige explains that often, style is “a coded response to changes

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<sup>9</sup> Andy Greenwald. *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*. (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003), 14.

<sup>10</sup> “Minor Threat.” Punkopedia. [http://www.punkopedia.com/content/Minor\\_Threat](http://www.punkopedia.com/content/Minor_Threat)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Films Transit. “American Hardcore.”

[http://www.filmstransit.com/index.php?option=com\\_jmovies&Itemid=70&task=detail&id=2](http://www.filmstransit.com/index.php?option=com_jmovies&Itemid=70&task=detail&id=2)

affecting the entire community”<sup>13</sup> and that punk rock style in particular was, when he wrote in the 1970s, “a form of Refusal”<sup>14</sup>: refusal to blend in, refusal to associate with other groups, and refusal to conform to a particular hegemony. As a reaction to hardcore, emo, too, could be identified as a form of refusal but in a different direction. As hardcore ultimately grew to influence the mainstream styles that had become too soft and preppy, in their views (according to Vic Bondi’s statement), emo grew as a response by individuals to create a space where it was safe to be emotional, particularly for males who were not supposed to display raw, feminine reactions or to indulge in emotions. Another major influence on emo was “glam” rock, which, like emo, played with gender. Hebdige refers to David Bowie’s influence on style and images regarding sexuality and gender as he writes that

Bowie, in particular...achieved something of a cult status in the early 70s. He attracted a mass youth (rather than teeny-bopper) audience and set up a number of visual precedents in terms of personal appearance (makeup, dyed hair, etc.) which created a new sexually ambiguous image for those youngsters willing and brave enough to challenge the notoriously pedestrian stereotypes conventionally available to working-class men and women.<sup>15</sup>

Andy Bennett writes in “The Forgotten Decade: Rethinking the Popular Music of the 1970s” that:

While David Bowie, Gary Glitter and other artists associated with glam rock certainly had emulators among their fan base, from a fan’s point of view the glam image was only attainable up to a certain point—typically make-up and hairstyle—the cost of materials and craftsmanship involved in the production of glam rock costumes putting them beyond the affordability of most glam fans.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dick Hebdige. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (New York: Routledge, 1979), 80.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Andy Bennett. “The Forgotten Decade: Rethinking the Popular Music of the 1970s.” *Popular Music History*. 2.1. (2007). 14.

However, the emo kids seem to differ drastically in one way from the glam rock ideals reflected and perpetuated by Bowie, in particular. While “Bowie’s meta-message was escape—from class, from sex, from personality, from obvious commitment—into a fantasy part,”<sup>17</sup> for emo kids, being authentic and revealing—so authentic, in fact, that baring one’s emotions rather than hiding them is rewarded and expected—is the norm.

While glam rock’s style is often described as “androgynous,” it is also depicted as “camp” and “outrageous,”<sup>18</sup> two words which do not accurately describe emo. Bennett points out the similarities and differences from punk and glam rock, from which emo emerged and draws upon in various ways: “While punk carried a very pointed social message of dissatisfaction and alienation, the glam image embodied a more carnivalesque sensibility.”<sup>19</sup> Glam rock provides a space in which a gender performance is constructed for obvious show with some audience, whereas emo does not proclaim to be performing, although perhaps there are “performances” in regards to the question of its authenticity, a point to which I will continually refer. If glam rock and punk are loud and screaming, different messages though they have, then emo is shy, bashful with intentions either to reveal one’s true self, as George claims above, or to simply attract sexual partners, as the Say Anything lyrics and several of my other interviewees will suggest.

The punk musical characteristic of tapping into the social dissatisfaction and alienation is continued, albeit modified, in emo in the solitude and loneliness which, rather than transformed into anger at society, is impressed upon the listener as sadness at the singer’s life circumstances and relationships. For example, in emo frontrunner

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>18</sup> See “Glam Rock.” Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glam\\_rock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glam_rock)

<sup>19</sup> Andy Bennett. “The Forgotten Decade: Rethinking the Popular Music of the 1970s.” *Popular Music History*. 2.1. (2007). 14.

Dashboard Confessional's song "This Brilliant Dance," the lyrics "So this is odd/The painful realization that all has gone wrong/And nobody cares at all" reveal a passive alienation or loneliness that is displayed time and again throughout emo. Though the singer indicates that he has transformed his anger into actions, they are personal, against a former love. Furthermore, they are hidden behind the second person perspective: "So you buried all your lover's clothes/And burned the letters lover wrote/But it doesn't make it any better/ Does it make it any better?" Rather than establishing an immediate anti-authority attitude as displayed by Bondi, Dashboard Confessional opts for a more subtle, emotional connection in his song, suggesting that "you" have partaken in these actions and not him as he ends the song by singing softly, "Yes, this is love for the first time/...Well this is the last time."

Greenwald claims that emo "has its tipping point, if you will—not in the mainstream consciousness, just the mainstream media,"<sup>20</sup> and Dashboard Confessional certainly had a hand in emo's introduction to the mainstream. He continues, "With Vagrant Records moving big numbers on every release, Jimmy Eat World going platinum, Dashboard Confessional taping an MTV Unplugged, and New Found Glory debuting at number four on the Billboard charts, the word emo—*always meaningless at best* [my emphasis]—became buzzworthy."<sup>21</sup> He indicates that the word had not previously been considered a favorable one, in that it had always been "meaningless *at best*" (my emphasis). A senior contributing writer at *Spin*, Greenwald's text provides a solid explanation based on his own observation and participation in various music scenes of emo kids, devoting an entire chapter to their definition in "Who are the Emo Kids?"

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<sup>20</sup> Andy Greenwald. *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

The interest in and active listening to emo music tends to be the prerequisite for entering into or adopting character traits from this particular subculture, with the outward physical changes, including boys' androgynous clothing and hairstyles, following suit.

Interestingly, the emo bands themselves typically refrain from deliberately labeling their music as emo. Emo music is described as sometimes "romantic" and "innocent," even "indulgent,"<sup>22</sup> with raw pathos-evoking lyrics that are often geared toward the teenage experience: the highs and lows of adolescent social relationships, of breakups and heartaches that often render themselves as gut-wrenching and highly individualized, yet are experienced and felt by many in masses portrayed in music played in small garage concerts or other venues. Early emo music from the mid-1990s "earned many, if not all, of the stereotypes that have lasted to this day: boy-driven, glasses-wearing, overly sensitive, overly brainy, chiming-guitar-driven college music."<sup>23</sup>

One reason why the emo subculture has embraced the 1999 novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* could be its focus on the importance of music in the characters' lives, much like the readers' own heavy interests in music. Twenty-two-year-old Cynthia, who (not uncommonly) denied being emo while still purposefully creating the appearance of an emo kid (multiple surface piercings, tattoos, and edgy, piece-y hair "elegantly disheveled"<sup>24</sup>), explained that *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was essential reading for emo kids in her high school. She graduated from high school in 2007, and she first encountered the novel in the latter part of 2004. "For me," she explained, "the novel was like breathing at the time. It was before I had gotten into the whole emo scene, which I

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 34-35.

<sup>24</sup> In the section entitled "Disowning 'Emo,'" I will refer back to the "elegantly disheveled" hair of the emo kid, coined by emo band Say Anything in their song, "Admit It."

am over now. It was before I had ever even heard of Dashboard Confessional. I read this book in geometry class instead of doing my homework.” *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* resonates with many emo kid readers, including Cynthia, because of its authenticity and its applicability to their own lives, which is likely why it was “like breathing” to Cynthia.

The protagonist Charlie and his friends frequently make references to being into the “punk” scene, that choosing to listen to certain music (in this case, punk) changes a person, or perhaps represents a shift in the individual’s personality. Either way, music plays an important influence in the characters’ lives in the novel, which are often represented nominally and at Charlie’s decision to include them, as most of the novel is Charlie’s perception of the events affecting *him* and not taking other people’s perspectives into account, a point which his sometimes-unrequited love interest, an older senior named Sam, criticizes him for in the end.<sup>25</sup> The influence of music in the other characters’ lives is evident as Charlie begins working for a fan ‘zine called *Punk Rocky*, which he describes as “this xerox [sic] magazine about punk rock and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.”<sup>26</sup> The reader also sees the role that music plays, as well as the historical context of the music of this time period, as Charlie details the songs he has included on a cassette tape he gives to his friend Patrick for Christmas; the artists include the 1980s band the Smiths, Nick Drake (who, “by the early 1990s...had come to represent a certain type of 'doomed romantic' musician in the UK music press”<sup>27</sup>), and the Smashing

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen Chbosky. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Gallery Books, 1999. 200-201.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> “Nick Drake.” Lyrics Freak. <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/n/nick+drake/biography.html>

Pumpkins, who formed in 1988.<sup>28</sup> Other artists mentioned throughout the novel are Nirvana, the Beatles, and Jim Morrison.<sup>29</sup>

What followed along the trail of emo's newly-mainstream success were the emo kids who, through the use of message boards, AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), and MP3 players spread the music and the fashion of the emo music scene. Another common physical expression spreading rapidly among emo youth are the adorning of piercings and tattoos, though simply having body modifications is common enough in American society that having them alone does not indicate that an individual is a member of the emo subculture, in part because "globalization is also changing the relationship people have with their own bodies" with the body no longer "reflect[ing] any more particular worldviews of particular cultures or societies but uniformized attitudes coming from dominant paradigms."<sup>30</sup> Greenwald cites a *Seventeen* article from around the same time as emo's "big break" that "ran a two-page pullout spread that doubled as an emo 'how-to' guide, detailing how girls should wear vintage clothes and hair barrettes; for guys, v-neck sweaters and visible copies of arty books (Salinger, Vonnegut) were a must."<sup>31</sup> With a new fashion for male youth adhering to the emo subculture's style of dress, standardized American manliness—often exhibited through various sports attire—was exchanged for feminine cuts in clothing and appreciation for literature, or at least the visible expression of it. The prominence of emo—and thus, its relative coolness at the time—is displayed from this article in a mainstream adolescent girls' magazine. Providing a "how-to" guide

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Chbosky. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Gallery Books, 1999. 62.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Josep Marti. "Tattoo, Cultural Heritage and Globalization." *The Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies*. 2.3. 1-9. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Andy Greenwald. *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 69.

for emo in such a mainstream magazine thus asserts its acceptability, its newfound coolness in the mainstream. These more sensitive-seeming brooding males could thus be appreciated by the vintage clothes-wearing girls, which seemingly illustrates or creates a new space for sensitivity in this subculture, even as it reinscribed heterosexual gender roles for males and females.

### **Literature Review**

In order to determine the influences and meanings of the emo subculture, and in particular the ways in which it provides space for males to transgress traditional masculine behavior and appearance, it is important to study the areas of masculinity, subcultures, and music history. These genres of academic literature and lenses through which to analyze emo are important and provide much insight into the subculture, albeit certain aspects of these areas, such as that of masculinity studies, fall short to explain the predominance of the emo subculture. Emo is a relatively new phenomenon, and the specific study of emo and emo kids is not yet widespread among American Studies or cultural studies literature. Though few academic sources are presently found on the emo phenomenon, various sources of emo literature, including humorous books, comic strips and cartoons, websites, and novels, can be studied for relevance under an academic gaze.

One of the more complicated aspects of the emo subculture is the way in which it provides a space for heterosexual males to transgress typical expectations of masculinity. While there is a space for homosexual males to exist within the emo subculture, the males are typically heterosexual. One way in which masculinity studies as a subject would benefit from expansion is in the focus of males who do not adhere to traditional maleness.

Males present within the emo subculture are one such group. Despite typically being heterosexual, they are often referred to as “emo fags” by those outside of the subculture. (Sam, an individual to whom I will refer in the section “Masculinities and Authenticity,” expresses his disgust at being labeled an “emo faggot” in high school, which leads to his subsequent bias against the emo subculture entirely.) “Fag,” according to C.J. Pascoe, is the worst insult a male could thrust upon another. She explains in her 2007 *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* that one male student, “a Latino junior, told me that this insult literally reduced a boy to nothing, ‘To call someone *gay* or *fag* is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that’s like saying that you’re nothing.’”<sup>32</sup>

Pascoe focuses specifically on masculinities as represented through both males and females in a California high school which she calls River High, which she deems to have been neatly categorized, at least in “walking through the bustling hallways at River High, watching letterman jacket-clad students rush past, and listening to the morning announcements...[as] a filming representation of the archetypal American high school.”<sup>33</sup> As she posits River High as the quintessential or archetypal American high school, she lets the reader know that her observations and insights into masculinity in high schools would likely be found at any other American high school, or at least that they are not rare or extraordinary in the least. In this important text, Pascoe explains that she observed and interacted with students, faculty, and administration over a period of fourteen months to determine how gender, specifically masculinity, works in the high school setting.

Establishing her connection to Butler and other social-constructionist feminists, she

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<sup>32</sup> C.J. Pascoe. *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*,156.

makes sure to state that “masculinity cannot be easily equated solely with male bodies.”<sup>34</sup> She analyzes the ritualized creating, enacting, and enforcing the importance of masculinity, both among males and females to whom masculinity was a crucial part of their identities. Furthermore, she explains that masculinity is created and represented for different purposes among males and females: while teenage boys at River High would often assert their masculinities by deeming one another “fags” and by telling sexually exploitative tales of females, a majority of the girls that Pascoe spoke with (whom she deemed the Basketball Girls) would assert masculinity to essentially gain power and to repress the need for femininity to be an all-or-nothing only option for girls.

One of the most important aspects of *Dude, You're a Fag* is that Pascoe details her speaking with River High students both in groups and as individuals. She makes use of lengthy quotations from the teenagers to highlight their individual voices, rather than simply observing them in group settings where authenticity of emotion may not always be explicitly present, as when the males denigrate females yet will often reveal softer, less predominantly “masculine” emotions to Pascoe in private conversations. While I did not experience the same binary of public machismo vs. private “softer” conversations with the males that I interviewed, I did notice that, because I interviewed males individually, they seemed willing to express themselves in ways that I would not have expected from the male emo kids that I observed in public gatherings in places such as Swayze’s. Furthermore, I found that highlighting the emo kids’ voices was imperative; by letting their words tell their own stories, it is easier to begin to grasp at what emo means to its participants and to those analyzing the subculture.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 155.

As a subculture, Greenwald explains the complications of the term emo as he writes that “emo isn’t [just] a genre [of music]—it’s far too messy and contentious for that.”<sup>35</sup> He explains that the term emo connotes a lifestyle for the members of this subculture, “a particular relationship between a fan and a band,”<sup>36</sup> despite the fans’ and bands’ often refusal to call themselves emo. Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley in *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture* also write of emo as a subcultural descriptive term, even as an ideology, rather than simply as a genre of music:

Over time emo has been defined as a tuneful strain of punk rock with a lyrical emphasis on matters of the heart, but these days it means much more than that to its many fans. Emo is still a kind of music, sure, but more than anything it’s a state of mind. It’s a place where people who don’t fit in—but who long to fit in with *other* people who don’t fit in—come to find solace....It seems safe to say that emo ideology affects nearly every aspect of emo fans’ lives. It affects how they wear their hair and what bands they choose to listen to.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, emo music is described as “romantically depressive....In emo, the heart forever hurts, and the ultraintrospective songwriter pines for beautiful death.”<sup>38</sup> Though it is meaningful to its participants, Greenwald is also careful to categorize emo as being a specifically fleeting description and genre of music because its main players and creators (and here, both band members and fans qualify) are teenagers. He sets up the emo subculture as primarily a teenager phenomenon as he explains that “as long as there are feelings, teenagers will claim they had them first. And as long as there are teenagers, music will get labeled emo.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley. *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). 1.

<sup>38</sup> “Hearts of Darkness.” *Architectural Digest*. (2008): 78-81. 78.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 5.

Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, while not providing specific insights into the emo subculture, does explain how these subcultures have formed as responses to mainstream culture. What is normal or expected one day can shift in its reception the next; "forms cannot be permanently normalized [and thus, oppositely, outcast as fringe or queer]. They can always be deconstructed, demystified...Moreover commodities can be symbolically 'repossessed' in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings, by the very groups who originally produced them."<sup>40</sup> Commodities exist within all subcultures: in emo, skinny jeans become '(re)possessed' and "endowed with implicit meanings" when boys and girls both wear them. In other subcultures, such as the goths as described by Amy C. Wilkins's in *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians*, dog collars and fishnet stockings take on a meaning by the individuals wearing them. If these commodities became part of the attire of "the normals," as the goths refer to hegemonically-centered individuals in Wilkins' *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians*, they would carry an entirely different meaning and would carry coolness with the mainstream, rather than with the goth subculture. Coolness becomes subverted, and is thus inherently unstable, like the objects that carry meanings that ultimately shift and can be "repossessed," as Hebdige claims. Likewise, when individuals strongly present within the hegemonic cultural base, such as teenage pop artist Justin Bieber, wear their hair in an emo style, its meaning becomes no longer "mod" and edgy, as described by Peters above. Trends become popularized and their meanings shift; by many accounts, the emo subculture is not considered "cool." It may not be widely dispersed among academic literature, but most adolescents attending high schools and colleges could identify one individual as emo and another as not.

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<sup>40</sup> Dick Hebdige. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (New York: Routledge, 1979), 16.

In fact, as Wilkins explains, “Young people use cultural symbols to establish group membership, to make their lives more tolerable or interesting, and to resist aspects of the mainstream that are constraining or from which they are already excluded.”<sup>41</sup> Cultural symbols indicate that the members are similar, and they help the members of the group identify one another in a crowd. Without even speaking a word, two members of the emo subculture could identify one another by similar hairstyles and clothing choices; importantly, members of the emo subculture could also identify non-members, all without ever exchanging words.

Similarly, these adolescents could discern the difference between the emo and goth subculture. One aspect in particular does overlap within the subcultures, which is that both present a space for potential (bi- or homo-)sexual exploration. The question of authenticity of these experiences is important, as I will explore further in the section entitled “Emo Boys Kissing: Each Other and Girls.” Like the emo males I describe in this section of my research, in *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians*, Wilkins presents evidence that indicates that the goth males kiss one another and speak of their own bisexuality as a way to appear attractive and “open-minded” to the girls whose attention they seek. Even Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* experiences his own pseudo-homoerotic experience as he kisses his homosexual friend. Charlie, though, seeks merely to provide comfort to his gay male friend, and is later chastised by his female friend and love interest for providing comfort in what she deems an inappropriate way.

Though, like Hebdige, Wilkins does focus on goths, who, like emo kids, “reject both conventional performances of white middle-classness and racially transgressive

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<sup>41</sup> Amy C. Wilkins, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

performances.”<sup>42</sup> For the goths, bisexuality and polyamory are indicators of coolness, which Wilkins explains is “like most everything else...contested terrain. Local meanings jostle with extralocal meanings. Within the same geographical space, individuals and groups launch competing claims to coolness. Despite this dynamism, cool activates race, class, and gender understandings.”<sup>43</sup> For these goths, “freakiness is an alternative way to do white, middle-class young adulthood,”<sup>44</sup> which I propose may be one way that the emo kids view becoming emo: an alternative way that is not nearly as contested as goth is in a social setting. Wilkins even claims that “some [goths]...eschew associations with people who are not visibly marked as freaks.”<sup>45</sup> In contrast, the emo kids whom I interviewed do not seem to aim for this type of deliberate outcasting, nor do they refuse to associate with others not visibly marked as emo.

Wilkins notices a homogeneity among the goths she studies that seems to be true as well for the emo subculture: “It is demographically homogenous: with a few exceptions, local goths are youth or young adults, white, middle-class to upper-middle-class, college-educated, liberal but not radical, unmarried, and childless.”<sup>46</sup> As Wilkins explains, “The goth label provides a concrete, definable identity—a shorthand way to convey selfhood.”<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, like emo, the term “goth” is something that the goths distance themselves from.<sup>48</sup> There is an obvious contestation between labels and boundaries present within these two subcultures; while goths in Wilkins’s text are clearly pushing away from the mainstream social norms and expectations, they, like emo kids,

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<sup>42</sup> Amy C. Wilkins. *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). 26.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

conform in their desire to be seen as “goth.” This even extends to their sexual practices, with males kissing other males not necessarily because of sexual attraction, but because to be seen as open-minded sexually is part of being—and doing—goth.

Essentially, these heterosexual individuals are quite often kissing same-sex partners in an attempt to “fit in” to their own subculture. Judith Halberstam in her text *In a Queer Time and Place* details where subcultures “fit” in society, as she explains that while “community, generally speaking, is the term used to describe seemingly natural forms of congregation... subcultures, however, suggest transient, extrafamilial, and oppositional modes of affiliation.”<sup>49</sup> Further, she explains her own fascination with punk in 1970s England, as Hebdige details. She explains a point that rings true for the emo kids, as well, as she explains that in her experience with punk participation: “And so I learned at an early age that even if you cannot be in the band, participation at multiple levels is what subculture offers.”<sup>50</sup> She explains the difficulty of subcultures to remain their own subcultures, as Hebdige also touches on in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, as she claims that

Mainstream culture within postmodernism should be defined as the process by which subcultures are *both* recognized and absorbed, mostly for the profit of large media conglomerates....On the one hand, the mainstream recognition and acknowledgement of a subculture has the potential to alter the contours of dominant culture....But on the other hand, most of the interest directed by the mainstream at subcultures is voyeuristic and predatory.<sup>51</sup>

She directly points to Hebdige as she writes that “One of the most influential texts on subcultures, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige, read subcultures in

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<sup>49</sup> Judith Halberstam. *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 154.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 155-156.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 156-157.

terms of the way they challenged hegemony through style rather than simply through overt ideological articulations.”<sup>52</sup>

Emo music created a space for emotionally-invested music by moving away from hard, political messages. While there appear to be differences in the individuals invested in primarily punk music and those finding resonances primarily in emo music, it is also important to note that listening to emo music does not necessarily make an individual a member of the emo subculture, nor does it indicate the full extent of an individual’s musical preferences. While dressing emo and listening to emo music do have a strong correlation, as with style in general, there are not necessarily definite, definable rules for the subculture; furthermore, the rules of style often shift or change completely. Styles often represent a particular (sub)culture, which, as Hebdige explains, “is a notoriously ambiguous concept....Refracted through centuries of usage, the word has acquired a number of quite different, often contradictory, meanings.”<sup>53</sup> Many emo kids mock one another for listening to music that is deemed culturally inappropriate within this subgroup, yet others within this subculture look up to other members for introducing them to new (often older) music. Musical style is often similar, but is, of course, ultimately dependent upon the individual. Lastly, not all emo kids dress exactly the same, although a certain protocol is adhered to in order for an individual to be characterized or identified as emo. Some may flirt with traditional gender dress more than others, perhaps even bordering or flirting on the edges of other subcultures, such as punk, glam, or goth. Some may choose not to physically dress in the emo role at all, yet these individuals still associate with emo kids and listen to emo musicians. It is possible—and therefore my

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>53</sup> Dick Hebdige. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (New York: Routledge, 1979), 60.

intent—to analyze this phenomenon for what it is: a subculture that provides a space for youth that had not previously existed, a space to be emotional and to explore the ways in which they found themselves to be different than the traditional adolescent. Feeling comfortable expressing the emotions that came without a price or a call to action, as in the politically-charged punk songs preceding this movement, became important to a group of kids, which has continually expanded to become a phenomenon, particularly in the United States. Emo is important to many adolescents, particularly those who feel that they do not have a voice or another outlet for their emotions. As Aaron P. Anastasi claims:

Emo songs have the potential to allow for a suffering adolescent to voice pain and grief....With prevailing pseudo-philosophies in modern culture such as “suck it up” and “get over it,” an adolescent boy may easily find himself in a situation where he feels guilty or weak if he expresses grief, concern, or complaint....By using a medium that adolescents are already familiar with and enjoy—Emo music with lyrics of lamentation—these paralyzing pseudo-philosophies can possibly be dispelled and overcome.<sup>54</sup>

### **Field Research and Methodology**

Over the course of a year, I spent extensive time researching, observing the behaviors of emo kids, and speaking with 10 individuals who can either be currently or formerly described as emo kids. I began by spending the first six months of my research studying the ways in which emo kids were represented in the media, as well as the ways in which they differed from other subcultures represented by the 1994 film *Clueless*. During the final six months of my research, I began narrowing down my subjects to studying important emo ethics, history, stereotypes, and identities of the emo kids, as well as observing and interviewing emo kids in public spaces. Ultimately, I divided my

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<sup>54</sup> Aaron P. Anastasi. “Adolescent Boys’ Use of Emo Music as Their Healing Lament.” *Journal of Religion and Health*. 44.3 (2005). 303-319. 316.

interest in the emo subculture in the following categories: style and public behavior among the emo youth; emo ethics, involving straight-edge and self-mutilation in the form of cutting; and the refusal of identification that is present with the term emo, including the drastic differences in what individuals reveal in public and online spaces. The interview responses and the observations I have recorded, along with secondary research supporting this information, will be woven throughout the following sections.

I decided it would be beneficial to listen to and perhaps participate in some of these conversations with the emo kids outside of Swayze's, in the Hot Topic at the local mall in Kennesaw, and in public places when I happened to run into emo kids. I spoke to people at Target, Starbucks, and Wal-Mart, among other stores. For my sitting outside of Swayze's, I decided to wear tighter blue jeans, frequently called skinny jeans, which seem to be popular among the emo crowd<sup>55</sup> with a plain-colored t-shirt, so as to blend in but to not be conspicuous. I sat outside of Swayze's on multiple occasions over the course of two weeks, as I had gathered from speaking to a Swayze's employee that different bands would draw somewhat different crowds. Thus, I determined that my being there by myself multiple days in a row would likely not be noticed and would not affect the results of my research as I listened to the conversations occurring.

Due to the contested and sometimes embarrassing nature of this topic to teenagers and emo kids in particular, I decided that, in order to best achieve honest input from speaking with individuals, it would be best to observe the conversations in public settings. Also, I set out to interview people who were alone or who seemed more open to speaking candidly, that is, not in front of their peers and not while they were actively

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<sup>55</sup> Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley. *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 49.

socializing with one another. I felt out of place because on this particular night, the crowd was a bit younger at around 14-17 years old being the average, with most of the individuals appearing to be on the younger end of the spectrum. The male Swayze's employee that I spoke with on the phone described this particular night as mainly attracting "a bunch of twelve-year-old girls" because of its musical selection.<sup>56</sup> This was obviously exaggeration, but they were, in fact, younger than the previous groups I had seen at Swayze's.

Fortunately for the purposes of my research, a concert venue called Swayze's in Marietta, Georgia is a local hangout for many emo youth, particularly those under the age of 18. One of the most striking attributes about Swayze's is the seemingly ordinary nature of this venue. Swayze's seems to be marketed particularly to those under 18 (and to their parents, as well), as it appears to be just another location along a strip of non-discreet shops, next to a nail salon, a food/snack store, a barber shop, and a graphic design store, to name just a few. Besides hosting the emo kids inside the actual concert venue, Swayze's also provided an outdoor congregation area in the parking lot by blocking off the front parking spaces with orange cones. After deliberation on the types of responses I believed I would be likely to receive in such a public space by mostly teenagers, I decided it would be most appropriate to conduct observations of the conversations, behaviors, and styles among these emo youth, rather than to interact and interview them specifically for this research. An important reason for doing so is the fact that these individuals never attended the local concerts hosted at Swayze's alone; they were constantly surrounded by friends, often carpooling in a jam-packed Honda Civic or other

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<sup>56</sup> This seemed to be an obvious put-down as to the particular band, whose name I was unable to record. This put-down is similar to the negative connotations that are associated with the word "emo," both as a descriptor of music and of individuals.

moderately-priced car (most of which were newer models than my 2000 Nissan Altima) or being dropped off two and three at a time by parents who were likely quite happy with the 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM concert start times. I did not want to disrupt the integrity of the comments and reflections individuals made, and I knew that doing so in front of their friends could perhaps result in less-honest, more rushed, and more joking or playful responses to the questions I asked of individuals. While such responses could warrant continued research by analyzing their meanings, I deemed it most appropriate to collect straightforward, honest responses from individuals willing to talk about the content. Furthermore, by choosing not to reveal my intentions, individuals did not feel as though they were being carefully observed by an adult intruding on their spaces (even though it was a public one).

After speaking with Farrah, a 21-year-old emo kid with an infectious laugh and multiple tattoos, I knew that Swayze's would be an ideal place to observe emo kids. Farrah, who does not go to Swayze's every weekend "like [she] used to when [she] was in high school," explains the popularity of Swayze's to me as such:

Look, when I was in middle school and maybe at the beginning of high school, I might have gone to the movies or something with my friends. But Swayze's became very cool, very fun. I would just get some money from my parents and go. It's super cheap and the kids have a lot of fun there. You get to hang out with your friends and see some music you dig and sometimes it's not just local bands. One time I saw Daphne Loves Derby there and they aren't local. I think that was the first time I went there. I think I was maybe 15 or 16. My cousin drove me and my parents approved of the music, so I could go on a weekend night.

"Can you describe your experience at Swayze's to me?" I asked her.

Yeah, it was fun. We sat along the wall outside and talked for a while before the show started. That first time, I didn't know anyone, but later on I started going with actual friends and a lot of us kind of knew each other or started to get to know each other. But it was just a friendly, fun place to

go. Once I got inside, I saw two friends from high school and we just waved at each other and listened to the music. I bought a shirt afterwards for pretty cheap. There were even chairs on the inside that I could sit down at, and someone just left her purse under the chair. I don't think I'd leave my purse on the inside without watching it, but I guess she felt like she could.

In addition to observing emo kids primarily at Swayze's, I also spent time conducting observations in stores such as the Hot Topic in Kennesaw, Georgia. While many of the individuals could be described as goth, a handful of the individuals located within this store fit into the emo subcultural description. While I had to appear seamless and inconspicuous while sitting on the curb at Swayze's and browsing through Hot Topic, an ordinary individual shopping or sitting outside just like the other emo kids, I was able to observe many times at Swayze's from the inside of my car, where I was able to type quickly and in a stream-of-consciousness style onto my laptop. The times that I was unable to use my laptop I had to make notes into my older Verizon Chocolate cell phone (in other words, with no special note-taking features other than SMS texting capabilities), pretending that I was text messaging but attempting to jot down as much as I could about what I saw without appearing obvious and potentially disrupting the integrity of the behaviors I witnessed. I have included several days' worth of field notes from my laptop in-car observation sessions at the end of this research paper in order to provide examples of detailed insight into what I witnessed, as well as my reactions to my frequent observations at Swayze's.

I should preface here that my expectations for gender roles are probably what would be considered fairly typical of other researchers. Samuel M. Davidson explains that "as U.S. culture continually constructs masculinity, and therefore femininity,

endorsed avenues for expression of masculinity have been limited and limiting.”<sup>57</sup>

Davidson further explains the importance of enacting one’s masculinity appropriately in a group setting: “Thus, polarised definitions of male, female, heterosexuality, and homosexuality often under gird and absorb traditional understandings of achievement, competition, worth, capacity, potential and accepted norms of individual and group expressions of manhood.”<sup>58</sup>

I expected, given my understanding of teenage male youth from teaching them in a public high school setting, for the males to be more dominant in conversations and in spaces than the females. While I initially believed (prior to my research) that the individuals would be engaged in actual gender bending or transcending, I have discovered that they are instead participating in an aspect of masculinity that occurs on a bit of the fringe of heteronormative masculinity, rather than creating a new masculinity or transcending masculinity altogether. Furthermore, I believed that the girls would have been more physically affectionate with one another, and that to the boys, male-male physically expressive friendships or behavior would connote, as Pascoe focuses on, “fag” behavior, or at least behavior worthy of verbally deeming such behavior as “fag”-ish.

While the observations of emo kids provided important, relevant, and surprising revelations into my research and assumptions about the emo subculture, the interviews I conducted with former and current emo kids where I received the information that best shaped and enhanced my understanding of what it means to be emo. I conducted interviews with 10 individuals between the ages of 18-23. Out of these 10 individuals, I

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<sup>57</sup> Samuel M. Davidson. (2009). “Mouths Wide Shut: Gender-Quiet Teenage Males on Gender-Bending, Gender-Passing, and Masculinities.” *International Review of Education*. 55.5/6, 617.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

selected nine of the individuals by approaching them in public at the Town Center mall in Kennesaw, where the Hot Topic is located. One of the individuals, Neal, was recommended to me by a friend who knew about my research and believed that Neal would be an ideal candidate to speak specifically about being a gay-identified male in the emo subculture, as well as the alternative masculinity (or masculinities) that the emo subculture provides a space for. No other male besides Neal was openly identified as gay, and so heterosexuality is assumed for this study. The method that I used to determine which individuals fit the criteria were as follows:

*Does the individual have an emo appearance (as characterized by dress and hairstyle, specifically)?*

*Does the individual appear to be at least 18 years of age (which I would then verify by asking verbally the individual's age)?*

*Is the individual by him- or herself?*

*Does the individual appear approachable?*

I used the following factors to determine whether the individual appeared approachable: The individual must not be wearing headphones or appear to be fully engaged in other behavior. The individual must not appear rushed or in a hurry, as I would not want to be an inconvenience and possibly offend the individual on his or her way to the appointed destination. Finally, the individual must make eye contact with me. I explained to all of the individuals that their responses were totally voluntary and that they could choose to answer certain questions and not answer other questions, as well as that the amount of detail that they chose to provide was completely at their discretion.

I was concerned about insulting the individuals I chose to interview by labeling the chosen them as emo, as this could be considered offensive or diminishing of his or her individuality or self-identification. Even though several denied being emo kids, despite their physical appearance characterizing them as such, all 10 individuals were open and willing to participate in an amicable discussion about the emo subculture. Once I began to actually interview the individuals, I asked them the following initial questions:

*What does emo mean to you/your friends or peers?*

*Describe emo boys' dress and behavior in your experience.*

*Why do emo boys dress/behave in this way (whichever way you answer for the 2nd question)?*

*How do emo boys differ from other, more traditional/stereotypically masculine males (in high school, at shows, etc.)?*

*What are girls' perceptions of emo boys?*

*Can you provide any other details about the emo lifestyle/emo kids that you find relevant to this discussion?*

Of course, these initial questions eventually led to further questions that differed depending on the individual with whom I was speaking at the time. Relevant issues covered emo boys' kissing, masculinities, and cultural expectations of emo kids, as well as what qualities initiated and/or tended to be prerequisites of certain individuals into the emo subculture. I will include the information from the interviews in the below sections, as well as provide detailed descriptions of the emo kids both as I introduce them and in a section at the end of this paper entitled "Research Participants."

## Looking and Acting Emo

### Emo Style

One of the beginning questions I asked of my interviewees was in regards to the style, dress, and otherwise physical appearance of the emo kids in public. While I had been able to identify what I perceived to be emo, I wanted to ensure that my definition was consistent, according to research in the literature and the observations I conducted. This is a relevant initial question because before one can learn more about the emo kid lifestyle, one must be able to accurately identify an individual as emo. In both the emo and goth subcultures, significance is placed upon the ways in which the members physically express themselves. Wilkins explains the ways that the body (and what adorns the body) is important in the goth culture:

Goths tell the world and each other who they are by making their bodies freaky. Goth bodies are clothed in black, pierced, tattooed, dyed, powdered white. The goth style juxtaposes medieval romanticism with bondage wear.... Goths may sport dog collars and spikes, or fishnets and corsets—all in somber colors: black or blood red. Goth style is dramatic, exaggerated, as Lili says, “over-the-top.” It reverses the dominant exhortations to look healthy, natural, or sunny, and to hide one’s sexual practices. It exploits unconventional fabrics and cuts, ignores color trends, and revels in gender-blending signs.<sup>59</sup>

While goth is clearly “dramatic” and “over-the-top,” emo appears to be much more attuned to trends and with not necessarily standing out by way of alienating members of other subcultural groups with their differences, but by attracting some attention. The look of an emo kid is not so much screaming, “I’m a freak, which makes me cool among my own group,” but more whispering anxiously, “See how cool I am with my tattoos and my ‘elegantly disheveled hair’<sup>60</sup>?”

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>60</sup> Refer to page 59 for the lyrics to Say Anything’s “Admit It!”

So how exactly *should* the emo kids dress, according to this prescription of emo rules? If, as Pascoe claims, “bodies are the vehicles through which we express gendered selves... [and] also the matter through which social norms are made concrete,”<sup>61</sup> what adorns these bodies that creates the emo style? Simon and Kelley’s *Everybody Hurts* speaks about the “principles of emo dress for guys and girls.”<sup>62</sup> They cite band t-shirts, polos with collars tipped up (from appropriate brands such as American Apparel, rather than Ralph Lauren)<sup>63</sup>, sweatshirts or “hoodies” as clothing worn by emo kids. Rather than providing paragraphs of information, as they do for the aforementioned clothing items, in the case of jeans, they simply write “See Girls’ Jeans.”<sup>64</sup> This indicates that not only are girls’ jeans appropriate attire for males and females, but that it is unquestionable that girls’ jeans are accepted and expected. No explanation or further information is provided because none is needed for this staple of clothing in the emo subculture. In the section specifically for females, Simon and Kelley write, “When it comes to jeans, the same rules apply to emo guys and girls. You shop in the same department, so it shouldn’t come as such a shock....Not Acceptable: ... anything with the words *loose* and *fit* in the description.”<sup>65</sup>

Because it is common for emo kids to dress alike, I was not surprised to find that the space for androgynous dressing in the emo subculture is apparent and rampant among the Swayze’s crowd. On several occasions, I witnessed individuals wearing similar clothing, yet on July 10<sup>th</sup>, I saw two emo kids, a male and a female, both wearing the

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<sup>61</sup> C.J. Pascoe. *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>62</sup> Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley. *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). 42.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

exact same outfit.<sup>66</sup> As I mentioned in my notes to myself in the field notes, the emo subculture seems unique in this regard. After all, in other subcultures, such as the heteronormative culture consisting of males and females with standard gender expressions, it would be highly unlikely to witness, for example, a football player and a cheerleader wearing the exact same outfit. Because the emo kids' outfits were similar even down to the type of shoes that they were wearing (differentiated only in that the girl's shoes were drawn on with permanent black marker), their two outfits seemed to be coordinated intentionally, perhaps as a joke or to commemorate an experience that they shared with one another, as they were both wearing the same band shirts. None of their peers indicated in actions, words, or gestures that this identical dressing was not socially appropriate. Because the emo styles are often interchangeable between males and females, this type of androgynous look is acceptable and is not shocking to others in the emo subculture.

Though they do not mention the gender roles that I noticed in my observations, throughout *Everybody Hurts*, Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley do mention that looking or acting particularly gender- or sexually-ambiguous is indicative of one's status as emo. For example, Simon and Kelley explain in an emo timeline that in 3000 BC "the first form of nail polish is invented in China. Presumably it is worn by women (and maybe men) who would've looked great singing along to the chorus of [emo band] My Chemical Romance's 'I'm Not Okay (I Promise)' into an air microphone."<sup>67</sup> Another example is found as the authors describe Morrissey's emo status, providing him one thousand "emo

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<sup>66</sup> I describe the outfit in the July 10<sup>th</sup> section of my selected field notes, included at the end of this thesis.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 11-12.

points” for being “sexually ambiguous.”<sup>68</sup> Black eyeliner is also rated as emo by the pair as they write: “It doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl....Everyone is more emo with black eyeliner.”<sup>69</sup>

## **Behaviors**

### **Public Behavior**

Besides the physical description of emo kids, as described by Peters and others in previous sections of this paper, I received somewhat unusual insight into how an individual might identify an emo kid in public from the first person that I interviewed, Sandra. A 22-year-old heterosexual female with cropped and dyed red hair, large tattoos on her arms and chest, and a lip piercing, Sandra describes herself as a “former emo kid” who “tend[s] to have the same negative view of emo kids [as her friends]....I would say it’s likely my friends feel similarly about it—it’s an embarrassing phase we went through when we still didn’t know who we were, so we don’t have much respect for kids who are currently doing it or for peers who stayed with it.” When pressed to explain how she would identify emo kids going through this “phase,” Sandra explained that “in the emo subculture, the kids ooze a lack of maturity and confidence to me.” 18-year-old George, a heterosexual self-identified emo male, agrees with Sandra as he tells me that “you might see kids joking around loudly in public or at a place like Hot Topic, shouting out profane words just because Zooey Deschanel did it in [the movie] *(500) Days of Summer*. That’s what you’d see in public.” (Zooey Deschanel, an actress popular among the emo kids, married Ben Gibbard of the emo band Death Cab for Cutie and emo side-project favorite

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 36.

The Postal Service in 2009. In fact, in a January 2010 online post by Relevant Magazine, Gibbard is described as “emo moppet and Mr. Zooey Descanel.”<sup>70</sup>)

Sandra’s, and particularly George’s, descriptions of emo kids did correspond with correspond with what I observed in my exploration of public behavior among emo kids at Swayze’s and Hot Topic. While I never observed emo kids yelling out obscenities for seemingly no reason, I was surprised to witness several individuals shouting personal information on private topics in public. One example includes two emo kids, one male and one female, who were shopping at Hot Topic. These two teenagers, whose ages I would estimate at between 16-18 years old, began screaming loudly about sexual matters. Other shoppers turned their heads in shock, and these kids never even looked at the other customers. The emo kids laughed and continued about their business. While they were carrying on a conversation, rather than loudly shouting, “Penis!” in a family park as Zooey Deschanel’s character Summer does in *(500) Days of Summer*, the elevated volume and unabashed tones of their voices indicated that they intended to be heard. Sandra’s lack of respect for emo kids seems to be illustrated in this example as the emo kids were distracting and seemed to be visibly irritating the other shoppers of the Hot Topic.

Another interesting aspect of the emo subculture is the importance that the emo kids place on their physical relationships with each other, even in public. This subculture consists of members who are quite physical with one another in the public space. While this could be simply teenage behavior at work, as I conducted my research, I noticed a lot of male-male, female-female, and male-female physical interaction. Some of these

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<sup>70</sup> Relevant Magazine. “Ben Gibbard + Jack Kerouac = Emo Explosion.” January 28, 2010. <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/main/slices/music/20142-ben-gibbard--jack-kerouac--emo-explosion>

interactions could be designated as “typical” interactions that could be observed in all teens and young adults, but in particular, the “fake punch” struck me as unusual and a contradictory blend of masculine expectations and behaviors.

In this “fake punch,” males would frequently pretend to “fake out” one another by punching each other, then stopping centimeters before the recipient’s face. One pair of these same males—the fake-puncher and the recipient—later sat down on the curb, no longer fake-punching and once again friendly with one another. The physical expression of their friendliness, however, was what was interesting. In one instance, the fake-puncher actually sat on the lap of the recipient of the fake punch. Curiously, no one in the crowd seemed to think that this was strange and there were no jokes seemingly being made about it. After a few minutes of sitting like this and speaking with other individuals in the group (all of whom were male), the lap sitter removed himself and continued the conversation quite normally while standing. The fact that he was sitting in the other boy’s lap, and that the other boy and the other males present did not express any discomfort whatsoever, indicates to me that the fake punching is simply an example of ways in which these kids are physically expressive. It is not unusual to see males punching at one another in this manner without any intention of actually hurting the other males, who are their friends. Rather, what is interesting about this interaction is the interesting blend of “typical” machismo-type masculinity of asserting dominance by punching one another and then that same individual choosing to sit upon the other’s lap. Sitting in laps is typically reserved as a “weak” and vulnerable form of touching; typically, females sit on male laps, and religiously- and traditionally-observant children sit on the laps of their parents and of “Santa Claus” around Christmas in public spaces. To mix the two—being

both assertive and vulnerable—is what the emo kid was doing in this public space. In this manner, he was able to eschew traditional masculinity in one form while not straying so far as to actually be considered un-masculine. Important also is the fact that no other males in the crowd found this behavior peculiar; their accepting it is indicative of just how normal this type of behavior truly is within the emo subculture.

Fake punching could perhaps be considered a means of controlling another individual, both his mental and physical (re)actions. In another instance of an individual—a male—controlling the actions of another individual—this time a female—, I witnessed a boy and a girl who were both dressed quite similarly hanging out together; in fact, I wavered back and forth between determining whether the boy was actually male or whether he was female. The long hair, facial piercings (two lip piercings side-by-side, often referred to as “snake bites”), and clothing matched the girl’s style exactly, and his face appeared somewhat androgynous—no facial hair or inherent “maleness” that would lead me to believe upon first impression that he was a male. In fact, only as I continued my observation did I determine that this emo kid was indeed male. I arrived at this conclusion by continued observation and intuition, then by listening to hear his voice to determine his gender. This male and female pairing behaved in a way that seemed to distort what I would have perceived to have been “typical” male-female roles. The boy, for example, leaped onto the girl’s back at one point, and she carried him around the parking lot. As they came to a rest and stood talking to other individuals in a large group, the male leaned his head on the female’s shoulder, resting there calmly and leaning against her for physical support. The girl, in multiple instances, literally carried the physical burden of the emo male’s body, thin frame though it was. He did not seem to

completely subvert his masculine role for a feminine one, however; he would repeatedly attempt to assert his “dominance” over her female body and who that body could stand next to and speak to. As she tried to speak to other guys in the group, he would consistently pull her backward or try to distract her. Even though these moves were not overtly aggressive, it was obvious that he was attempting to control her body and the spaces of its inhabitation in a more subtle, less obvious way.

As I conducted observations of emo kids, I was often unable to discern whether two individuals were a couple or simply friends—and sometimes, whether an individual was male or female. This blending in with one another was incredibly common and lends to the stereotypical belief that emo kids are “posers” and inauthentic, a point to which I will return later. These blurry lines between individuals’ identities were exhibited at Swayze’s in particular more so than in other settings. Often, for example, I would be certain that two emo kids were a couple, as they were being physically affectionate with one another, but then these couples would seemingly “switch” around. I wondered at one time that I had seen a female-female homosexual couple emerge from a car together holding hands, but then the girls immediately were greeted by a young emo male, who kissed one of the girls but was simply friendly to the other. I then was able to see that the male and female who kissed were a couple, while the other girl was simply a friend of the couple. Seeing girls holding hands, and guys shaking hands, were ways in which the emo kids were physically affectionate in their behavior with one another in public.

### **Online Presences**

After our initial conversation, I contacted George once more to see whether he had any experience in online forums. I was interested in determining whether he had ever

actively sought out emo forums online, as he would blatantly admit his identity as an emo kid offline. George explained that he had browsed emo message boards online from 2007-2008 but that he himself had never created an alias or username and posted in any of these forums. He told me, “I looked them up on and off back when I first started listening to bands like Brand New and Taking Back Sunday and I wanted to get my hair cut just like Adam Lazzara [lead singer of Taking Back Sunday].” He then explained that even though he initially sought pictures of emo haircuts, including Adam Lazzara’s, he had also come across other topics regarding emotional issues. “They seemed like a place where people could speak openly,” George said with a shrug. “It seemed cool to me.”

Simon and Kelley write that “at this point, online communities are such a huge part of the emo existence that it’s hard to remember what life was ever like without them.”<sup>71</sup> Emo kids write to one another on forums geared to attract like-minded individuals about problems that they are experiencing and to voice frustrations and ask specific cultural and individual questions, among other issues and topics of conversation. The likelihood that an emo kid will post about serious issues on a forum is quite probable, given that forums provide a safe space where other emo kids are going to be “hanging out”; the individuals participating are unlikely to mock one another (otherwise they would not sign up to become members of the forum, and if they did, the moderator would have the capacity to ban them the moment they made other members uncomfortable or expressed disrespect, essentially breaking the rules of the cyberspace forum) and importantly, they can talk about issues that they may not be able to talk about with peers local to their geographic region. This ability to communicate more readily

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<sup>71</sup> Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley. *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). 74.

online in an emo forum (and thus specifically identify as emo) than in person could be for several reasons. Emo kids could feel particularly isolated in their geographic region where the emo subculture may be insignificant in number compared to the rest of the social makeup of their peers. They could also feel, like many teenagers do, that opening up to strangers may afford them greater privacy in real life matters, thus affording them the opportunity to express themselves openly without fear of their words following them around incessantly at school, among peers with whom they must interact on a daily basis. If they reveal too much of themselves in real life (IRL), they can be subject to scrutiny, teasing, and other negative repercussions that will not be forgotten by peers with whom they must interact; if they reveal too much online, they can simply log off the website, choosing another of the many emo forums available through a simple Google search.

One particular forum, Emoforum.org, features a topic started by a user who calls himself Solace. Solace asks the following question to his fellow emo kids on this forum:

I like to consider myself emo, but I don't wear skinny jeans, nor do I cut. But my girlfriend is emo and a lot of my friends are emo (and a lot of my friends are in other subcultures as well). I really like the emo lifestyle culture though, including their morals, music, fashion, and various other cultural influences. What do you think? Do you think it's possible to be emo without being a stereotypical emo?

Solace indicates that he is able to be friends (and in a relationship) with other emo kids, but that emo is not an exclusive group. However, the fact that Solace feels the need to ask other emo kids whether or not he is truly emo if he is not stereotypically emo indicates some insecurity on Solace's part: insecurity that he does not fit the subcultural standards "correctly" or in totality, and thus that he would effectively find himself as unfit to carry the emo label. What is interesting about these message boards, in contrast to actual IRL hanging out of emo kids, is that the members of these boards outright identify as emo.

This outright identification and labeling of themselves and other members as emo therefore grants them possibility to talk about emo matters, such as whether or not one is truly “emo,” in a way that does not denigrate the subculture. IRL conversations, on the other hand, are much less likely to be conducive to such discussions of emo as something of which one is proud of, or can fully admit to, belonging to, even if all participants are considered emo by themselves and others.

The virtual wall is taken down somewhat by users posting avatars that are usually actual pictures of themselves. Though the avatars are not full-length pictures, but are rather small renderings of images, the user’s “emo-ness” is evident with the hairstyle and clothing displayed. This blurs the line between IRL and online forums because users can imagine who it is that they are speaking with. The fact that IRL friends talk to one another through online forums such as Facebook and other instant message opportunities blurs this line as well, since users are familiar with online chatting with “real” people with real pictures—pictures that often look quite similar to their own.

Another user, xxshadexx, expresses insecurity in belonging to the emo subculture. His insecurity, like that of Solace, does not stem from what others may think of his belonging to the emo subculture, but rather that he is too old to be properly accepted as emo. He expresses that he is 19 years old, and that he recently read on Yahoo! Answers that 19 is too old to be emo. Another user, an administrator of Emoforum.org, explains that age has nothing to do with it. Interestingly, though, he indicates emo’s relative uncoolness as an outright spoken cultural act as he claims that many people hate emo “just because.”

One of emo's draws to mostly white, middle-class youth is highlighted in a question asked on Emoforum.org by a user with the handle of JazziKazzi. JazziKazzi posts a drawing, presumably one that she has drawn herself (though she does not directly state this) of a white teenager with long brown hair, nice middle-class clothing (a striped sweater and blue jeans) and, interestingly, no eyes or mouth. The girl in the drawing also is shown with large wings. The typed sentence on the drawing states: "Rehabilitation to allow patient to carry out daily living activities independently," while handwritten text reads in bold-faced capital letters drawn over several times for emphasis (indicating despair): "Why did you leave me alone?!"<sup>72</sup> JazziKazzi, along with posting the picture as the main draw in her thread, states that she wants to disappear. Furthermore, she requests that if other emo kids feel the same, that they respond and "tell [her] about it."

One user does respond to JazziKazzi in a particularly revealing manner. This user, Dani, who actually presents herself as a black, middle-class youth in her avatar (computer image designated to represent her in her online posts) and response, explains that she, too, feels this way:

Everyone thinks my life is perfect because my parents are still together, I am spoiled by my family, I attend a early college, and I have all this other stuff. But what they don't know is that I am suffering from depression. I tend to push people away when I feel they are too close. For example I lost many good friends and boyfriends. It's like no one understands me at all and I hate it. I feel everything is my fault and I wish I could disappear sometimes =/

Dani represents her family situation as being highly privileged in that her parents are together, in spite of a more than 50% divorce rate in the United States, and that she is afforded the highly advantageous opportunity to attend college earlier than her peers. Therefore, she should be happy and not depict herself as emo, emotional, or depressed.

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<sup>72</sup> See Appendix A.

Due to Dani's seemingly "perfect" life, she seems to feel that she has no right to complain or even reveal any difficult situations that she faces, including her self-assessed depression. Because of the socioeconomic status of her family—and perhaps even highlighted because she is a minority living in a majority white-occupied class group—she could find comfort in other teenagers who, like she, reveal dark feelings. Because emo provides a space for these feelings, this subculture seems to be a natural place for Dani—and for others who find comfort in the focus on emotion found in the emo subculture.

### **Transgressive Masculinities**

Straying from traditional, heteronormative masculinity as the "new man" began to do in the 1980s certainly has its price. This "new man" was a result of a reaction to the political, economical, and cultural expectations and actions of the 1970s (echoing Vic Bondi's sentiments on page 6. Being emotionally sensitive—or, as some might deem, a "wimp"—is not usually held in high regard as a desirable trait for men, even though many women complain of men lacking this trait. In fact, as Michael S. Kimmel explains in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, when the "new man" began to appear in the 1980s, "Some women openly regretted their demands that men become more emotionally expressive."<sup>73</sup> In fact, "very few Americans bought the new man package.... The new man was immediately on the defensive, afraid of being perceived as a sissy, a wimp.

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<sup>73</sup> Michael S. Kimmel. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2006), 194.

‘Real men’ hated wimps because they were so obeisant, as devoted as simpering puppies and just about as sexually compelling.”<sup>74</sup>

In a similar fashion, emo(tional) males have a distinctly different (re)presentation of their masculinities than what is currently considered the norm in American culture. As one emo girl, a 20-year-old Christian nursing student named Lucy, explained to me, “Emo boys dress [the way that they do], I think, because they are into hardcore music, and so the style kind of comes with the music. I think some do it because they have felt different all their lives and are just reacting to it and by doing so [they] find other people who have also felt rejected, therefore fitting in with the other emo kids.” When I asked her about what the typical American male would think upon viewing the emo males, as well as to how they differ from the typical American male in the expressions of their masculinities, she replied,

To the masculine guys, [emo males] are viewed as sissy. They are also more timid and quiet. They are usually really skinny, not muscular or masculine guys. [However], at shows... they are viewed as cute or normal. They fit in at a show, while they may be singled out or made fun of in school for being sissy or different.

A common assumption in Western culture is that men do not find as much importance in emotional connections in romantic relationships as women do, but in fact, a recent (2011) study has proven this belief to be unfounded.<sup>75</sup> Despite having a “sissy” name, as Lucy would describe it, the article title is “Men Need Cuddles, Too” indicates that the general public’s assumption is that men did *not* need physical affection, while women did. The heteronormative individuals at Lucy’s high school who believed that emo guys were “sissy” fit into this category, as well. That “men need cuddles, too” is

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Stephanie Pappas. “Study: Men Need Cuddles, Too.” Livescience.com. July 5, 2011. <http://www.livescience.com/14911-men-cuddling-relationships-sex.html>

newsworthy indicates a separation between the two sexes that is now being revealed as a misunderstanding. The emo subculture, however, resists this former postulation all on its own by allowing and facilitating emotional expression of its male members through identifying with emotional song lyrics and behaving in less normatively masculine manners.

Emo boys, according to Neal, “are most often associated with being more open and emotional, and I’ve noticed that they are generally more accepting of other people.” Neal postulates that “perhaps those who are attracted to the emo [sub]culture are, mostly, aligned with this openness.” The emo subculture provides an outlet, a space of identity creation, for an alternative type of masculinity than the prescribed heteronormative masculinity typically deemed “normal” for the average American high school male. While these male emo kids are not specifically identifying as transgender or transsexual, they dress and behave in ways that are atypical of the norm. Not only did I witness males being physical with other males, but I also observed and spoke with emo kids about a particular trend of emo boys kissing one another. This fad is particularly interesting because it is socially acceptable, at least to some degree. As the research will indicate, the emo subculture does not necessarily provide a free-for-all range of sexual exploration for males, but rather, it is emerging as a space that can consist of new masculinities.

One example of the loosening of rigidity in the ideals of masculinity is exhibited by one means of social media among the emo kids. Immediately popular among the emo subculture, the social networking website MySpace launched in 2003 while I was a sophomore in high school. Members of MySpace could join online “groups” indicating their interests and linking up with other members interested in similar things. One

popular group that many teenage girls joined at the time indicated their interest in “emo boys making out”: pictures were posted of this phenomenon of guys who claimed to be heterosexual, kissing one another for the camera and for the girls viewing the images, which were often digitally altered for “artistic value” by being set to black-and-white only or enhancing the brightness value of the image. In fact, the website Urban Dictionary has eleven separate listings for “Emo boys kissing,” which users provide definitions for. One user, Thelfo, supplied a definition of “emo boys kissing” on May 1, 2006 that reads:

Two or more boys in skin tight t-shirts joined at the off-centre lip ring because they think they’re the most sought after spectacle around and are breaking all kinds of conformity, despite the fact that they all dress exactly the same, all listen to the exact same music, all kiss each other because they can’t get any girls to do it for them....Far from being an act of teenage exploration which can be fondly recalled in years to come, most boys who... [kiss one another do so for] the publicity they craved in doing it and the fact that the only publicity that they got was from their female friends who will never look at them twice saying “aww cute lolxXx <3.”<sup>76</sup>

As of June 21, 2011, more than 2000 users had provided approval that this definition was indeed accurate by clicking a “thumbs up” icon next to the definition.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, the definition directly below this entry (also titled “emo boys kissing”), provided by user T. Lex, simply describes it as “the act of two males who fit emo standards smooching. not [sic] gay, just doing it for the publicity,” while the third entry lists it as “an act to attract the attention of emo girls under the disguise of sexual exploration and rebellion against social boundaries...pretending to be gay to get girls...possibly one of the strangest things other females find attractive.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “Emo Boys Kissing.” Urban Dictionary. [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=emo boys kissing](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=emo%20boys%20kissing)

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

This is similar to Wilkins' notion of goth guys who claim to be bisexual so as to seem open-minded and to subsequently attract girls and gain social acceptance in the scene. The difference lies in the way that those in the majority, or the norm, as a general rule appreciate and view the different subcultures. As the emo subculture receives more acceptance and strays less from typical dress, clearly, at least publicly, standards for what heterosexual females find attractive are shifting to reveal a culture that welcomes behavior that strays from normality. That the males are willing to comply is less likely indicative of their willingness to explore their place on the sexuality continuum, but rather that they are willing to conform to new standards to receive old rewards: acceptance and the ability to attract others.

It is fascinating that emo is popular among these individuals of middle class backgrounds, as one of its main features is the obvious appeal to somewhat androgynous appearances and behaviors of the emo kids. I use the term "somewhat" to describe these androgynous behaviors because there are certain lines and boundaries that are not typically crossed within the emo space, such as actual elimination of delineation between male and female. However, as I discovered throughout my research, certain behaviors were shared by boys and girls alike, including the choice of which clothes to wear, the cuts and styles of their hair, and the levels of physical affection and touching between individuals of both opposite and same sexes. Peters addresses the androgyny present within the subculture as he writes that "emo...manifests a subculture of androgyny, springing from the postpunk scene of the mid-1980s, [sic] emo has become queer as it

responds to mainstream youth images and the far too regimented delineations of gender.”<sup>79</sup>

While I did not witness any emo boys kissing in my observations, but rather heard the group of emo kids talking about their friend “Jack” at the party whose girlfriend had attempted to coerce him into kissing his other male friend, the trend of emo boys kissing one another has certainly been a part of this subculture. Responding to the “stringent ideologies” of the world, present within both straight and gay masculinities, emo “creates a space for necessary slippage.”<sup>80</sup> While Peters specifically addresses individuals who find themselves within both the gay and emo worlds and who find overlap among these two, there is evidence that straight individuals are participating in these activities as an attempt to be attractive purely (or perhaps mostly) to heterosexual females to whom they are attracted. Jon, a 23-year-old emo kid fond of wearing oversized dark glasses and band tee shirts who actually detests the label of “emo” told me that

Despite dressing more feminine...[in] tighter clothes...and looking at fashion in a more feminine way, you know, putting forth effort to look skinny, spending time fixing hair...and despite rallying against stereotypical masculinity most emo boys still follow the pattern of sexual masculinity. Specifically [they are] making out with as many girls as possible and attempting to have sex with as many girls as possible.

According to Jon, having sexual relations with “as many girls as possible” is an ambition motivating emo boys’ behaviors to appear sensitive. Sam, an individual who also detests the term “emo” and the kids who label themselves as such, further engaged in Jon’s belief as he complained that “‘Emo’ bands pretend like they have feelings, but really they’re just making really terrible (mostly ‘pop punk’) music about themselves so

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<sup>79</sup> Brian M. Peters. “Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)thinking Images of Masculinity.” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7.2 (2010): 7.2, 129-146. 136.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

that they can get into girls' pants." Nineteen-year-old Neal, the sole self-identified homosexual emo kid whom I interviewed, echoed this sentiment as he told me that emo boys kissing one another "may have been attracted to a lot of girls because it was something [emphasis added here by Neal] 'so risqué' during a time when hormones were raging." Further, Neal alludes to another phenomenon of the emo youth (the differences between what individuals, specifically emo kids, will reveal online and "in real life") as he explained that "I have never seen [emo boys kissing] myself, only online. Does this say anything [to you]? Maybe the idea ... was seldom something that happened [in offline/real life congregations of emo kids]." Furthermore, Neal was careful to say, "I do not care what people do, but I am critical in the fact that I consider boys kissing other boys...as something of a fad." He explained that he does not believe in bisexuality, and therefore that he would not consider emo boys kissing as something that they are doing for the purposes of acting on and/or seeking *both* male and female attraction. Neal continued to speculate as to the intentions of emo boys in kissing one another as he told me, "I will admit that I believe these things [emo boys kissing one another] are done in order to appear sensitive and sensual."

Much of the conversation between these emo kids in the parking lot at Swayze's circled around the intertwining social lives of the teenagers. However, one interesting piece of evidence of an avenue for new masculinity in the emo subculture presented itself on one particular observation session I conducted. About an hour into the show starting, there were still approximately 20 kids in the parking lot. Though this was a fluid crowd in that some moved inside to socialize while others from the inside came out into the parking lot to socialize, a steady group constantly remained in the parking lot. One

particular group of two boys and two girls began to talk about their romantic relationships. One boy, who wore a gray cap over his curly light brown hair even though it was a 90 degree late July afternoon, was telling the girls about his friend “Jack” who had been at a party with his girlfriend recently. Although the boy never provided any indication, either subtly or overtly, that Jack and/or his girlfriend were emo, these teenagers indeed fit this description. His girlfriend had tried to coax him to kiss another boy because “she thought it would be hot,” he claimed. The other girls shouted out encouraging comments, such as, “Oh, man, I love when guys do that!” and “Dude, that *would* have been hot!” while the other boy that was there began to laugh and agree with the original speaker that this would not, in fact, have been something that Jack should have been interested in participating in, even at his girlfriend’s request. This insinuated that both boys thought that this type of behavior would have been inappropriate for both of them, but also for Jack, as well. That the girls were encouraging this behavior indicated that it was attractive to them and would have been awarded with social approval among the emo kids if it had occurred. That Jack hesitated, though, and that the boy was even telling the story *about* his friend indicates that this behavior, while not unacceptable enough to be undesired by the girls, is apparently not common enough that all the boys are doing it without hesitation. There is room *for* this type of sexual exploration, but the lines are blurry. They are blurry in regards to *why* the emo males are kissing one another, and even as to whether they actually are or not, on a large scale.

### **“Feeling” Emo/Emo Ethics**

#### **Straight Edge (SxE)**

Emo offers a space for youth to abstain from drinking, drugs, and sexual activity. While it is not required to be in the emo subculture, many emo kids proclaim themselves as “straight edge” and that they do not indulge in these activities common among teenagers and young adults. Straight edge is described at [straightedge.com](http://straightedge.com) as

a subculture centered around hardcore music... The fuck you and fuck the world attitude didn't make sense to them. They took a symbol that was originally used to identify them as being too young to drink so that the bartenders would know not to serve them and they made it their own. So they started setting themselves apart by wearing X's on their hands and by singing angry songs proclaiming:

*"I'm a person just like you  
But I've got better things to do  
Than sit around and fuck my head  
Hang out with the living dead  
Snort white shit up my nose  
Pass out at the shows  
I don't even think about speed  
That's something I just don't need  
I've got the straight edge"<sup>81</sup>*

The above quote is a set of lyrics from Minor Threat's 1980 song "Straight Edge." Many individuals in the emo subculture decorate their bodies in ways proclaiming their dedication to remaining straight edge, some in temporary ways that wipe off (for example, putting Xs on their hands with black markers as the website [Straightedge.com](http://Straightedge.com) describes above) and others adorning their bodies with permanent declarations, such as tattoos.<sup>82</sup> Rather than embarrassingly refusing alcohol without providing an “appropriate” explanation for their peers, straight edge offers an outlet for individuals who can simply respond to an offer of alcohol at a party with, “No, thanks, man. I’m straight edge.”

Kathie, a 21-year-old emo girl, told me about her experience with straight edge in high school:

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<sup>81</sup> Straight Edge. “What is Straight Edge?” [Straightedge.com](http://Straightedge.com).

<sup>82</sup> See Appendix B for example.

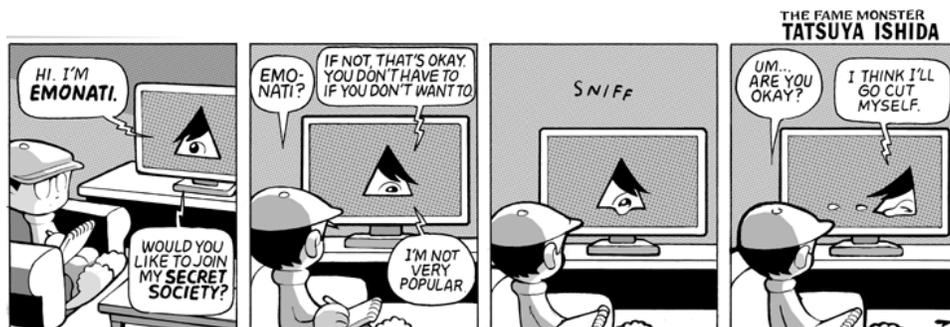
Okay, yeah, I'm twenty-one now....But when I was in high school, I'm talking like, since I was fifteen, I had people offering me stuff I didn't really know if I wanted to do. It's not like I cared if my friends did it, but I just didn't think it was for me. Not right now. And I think a lot of girls and maybe guys want to say they're straight edge so they don't have to sleep around with people. Instead of being a prude, you're straight edge, and that's cool. At least for a little while until people figure out that straight edge is lame or that it's lame to call it straight edge or whatever.

When I mentioned to Kathie that it seemed like the emo subculture provided a place where people could feel comfortable in the decisions that they made about their lives, in addition to simply being a subculture consisting of individuals with similar tastes in music and fashion. "I think so," Kathie agreed, nodding.

"I don't know. I can't really say what it's all about. I just know that I heard some people talking about straight edge—I don't really remember when I first heard it. But I thought, yeah, that's me. I'm straight edge. It sounded okay to my friends, who just kind of knew, okay, she's straight edge, so she doesn't want this."

When I asked her what "this" meant, she just shrugged and said, "You know, a joint, a drink, whatever." By claiming to be straight edge, Kathie was able to avoid participation in activities that she did not feel comfortable doing. Providing a label and a lifestyle option for kids in the emo subculture gives these kids a new language within which they can express their values and ethics.

### Cutting



The above cartoon<sup>83</sup> demonstrates several key beliefs about the emo subculture. First is the importance placed upon online spaces, as Emonati reaches out through the computer to the individual sitting alone at the desk. It is also important to note the hairstyle of Emonati, dark and swooping across one eye. Second, Emonati also tells the character that he is unpopular and lets out a “sniff” in the third slide, indicating that this fact makes him sad. He is so sad, in fact, that when the confused individual inquires about his emotional state (“Umm...are you okay?”), he responds with, “I think I’ll go cut myself.” As this cartoon, as well as the individuals and research, has demonstrated, a common stereotype characterized of the emo individual is that he or she is brooding and overly emotional, dwelling on the melancholic events in his or her life. Frequently, self-mutilation (particularly cutting, frequently of the wrist, arms, and legs) is identified with the emo subculture. Cutting is described as “self inflicted epidermal damage (derma-abuse) [that] describes a number of blood letting behaviours among adolescents. Unlike suicidal behavior, it is associated with low lethality and the absence of suicidal attempts.”<sup>84</sup>

As George indicates, emo spaces are not necessarily all the same. Some, like online spaces such as message boards for emo kids, seem to allow certain types or means of expression, while in others these expressions are less permissible. One example is the Facebook group “Forget cutting, the REAL emo kids punch themselves in the face.” While this open group’s number of members is relatively low at 25, the humor associated with the emo subculture is obvious as its creator writes that

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<sup>83</sup> This cartoon can be found at [http://www.sinfest.net/archive\\_page.php?comicID=3940](http://www.sinfest.net/archive_page.php?comicID=3940).

<sup>84</sup> Hari D. Maharajh and Rainah Seepersad. “Cutting and Other Forms of Derma-Abuse in Adolescents.” *Health*. 2.4, 2010. 366-375. 366.

It seems that the classic emo kid practice of cutting has become an overused trend. It has become popular among the wannabe emo kids to attempt to fit in with the real emo kids. This has made cutting no longer cool among the real emo kids. From now on, the truly [sic] emo kids will prove their emoness [sic] by punching themselves in the face.<sup>85</sup>

This Facebook group provides insight into the emo subculture, albeit through the use of a sarcastic tone, by indicating the popularity of the presumption that emo kids cut themselves. This is so obvious and unquestionable to those within the emo subculture that the so-called “wannabe” emo kids have decided that they must adopt this behavior in order to be “truly” emo, and thus the true emo kids no longer find this furtive behavior quite as appealing. This humoristic approach does not seem to indicate true behavior of its members, but rather pokes fun at the belief that emo kids cut.

The seriousness of cutting is also approached online, however, as one member named Punkrockprincess (presumably from the emo band Something Corporate’s song “Punk Rock Princess”) of the website Emobucket.com explains in a thread she created that “there will always be those in the scene who want to be ‘hardcore’ by cutting themselves, but this is going way too far. I met a girl today who used her mother’s lipliner to make it look like she had been cutting herself when her boyfriend broke up with her, and I think it’s absolutely repulsive.”<sup>86</sup> Though Punkrockprincess finds the behavior repulsive, she provides a contradiction as she says, “Either you cut (and I have an unholy amount of respect for those who do), or you don’t, but you don’t fake it....No one likes a person who brags about how BA [badass] they are by showing their scars,

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<sup>85</sup> “Forget cutting, the REAL emo kids punch themselves in the face.” Facebook.com. <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2249262906>

<sup>86</sup> “‘Emo’ kids using makeup to make it look like they have cutting scars.” Emobucket.com. <http://forum.emobucket.com/serious-discussions/51187-emo-kids-using-makeup-make-look-like-they-have-cutting-scars.html>

especially if you can't handle actually doing it. You're just fueling stereotypes."<sup>87</sup> Here, Punkrockprincess addresses the importance of originality (or at least its implication) in the emo subculture, as well as the predominance of the *stereotype* of emo kids cutting. She does not, however, dispel that it actually happens; rather, she indicates that the behavior perhaps occurs not because the individual is emo, but that the individual is emo *because* of the cutting.

While the belief that all emo kids cut is stereotypical and not based on absolute fact, it is not uncommon for troubled teenagers to cut themselves. In the summer of 2011, Demi Lovato, an 18-year-old actress, admitted to suffering emotional difficulties as a young girl suffering from bipolar disorder and cutting herself. While not emo herself, Lovato's public struggles point to an issue not frequently talked about in the media, even though they are common among teenagers. In fact, Sue Hubbard writes, "Studies show that somewhere between 14-17% of high school and college students have admitted to cutting themselves."<sup>88</sup> With this indication that the number of teens cutting themselves is so high, it is obvious that organizations supporting recovery and promoting healthy emotional development are imperative. One such organization supported by the emo subculture is called To Write Love on Her Arms. Prior to completing this research, I had noticed the predominance of individuals in the emo subculture displaying shirts with these words listed in bold, large print on them, but I was unsure of what exactly it meant. On its website, To Write Love on Her Arms describes itself as such in its mission statement: "To Write Love on Her Arms is a non-profit movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for people struggling with depression, addiction, self-

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Sue Hubbard, M.D. The Kids' Doctor. "Demi Lovato: Why Teens Cut Themselves." <http://www.kidsdr.com/daily-dose/demi-lovato-why-teens-cut-themselves>

injury and suicide. TWLOHA exists to encourage, inform, inspire and also to invest directly into treatment and recovery.”<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the vision of To Write Love on Her Arms has a very emo(tional) connotation, and is even written in emotionally compelling and driven text, as it is described as such:

The vision is that we actually believe these things...  
 You were created to love and to be loved. You were meant to live life in relation to other people, to know and be known. You need to know that your story is important and that you're part of a bigger story. You need to know that your life matters. We live in a broken world, a difficult world... We all wake to the human condition. We wake to mystery and beauty but also to tragedy and loss. Millions of people live with problems of pain. Millions of homes are filled with questions—moments and seasons and cycles that come as thieves and aim to stay.<sup>90</sup>

The connection to authenticity (“we *actually* believe these things” [my emphasis]), as well as the focus on emotional topics and connections to other individuals is apparently found within the mission statement and vision of this non-profit organization. The prevention of self-mutilation, suicide, and other self-inflicted tragedies demonstrates an ethical foundation for the emo subculture that provides relief and a sense of community. It is not difficult to understand why the emo subculture has embraced this movement wholeheartedly. Furthermore, the organization’s Wikipedia entry suggests that recognizing and learning about the movement is not uncommon:

The group’s main exposure comes from musicians and bands who wear the organization’s distinctive T-shirts in photographs and performances, however it has recently gained more and more public exposure through merchandise and public community websites such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and Tumblr. TWLOHR had a booth at every shop at Vans Warped Tour for the past four years.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> To Write Love on Her Arms. “Vision.” <http://www.twloha.com/vision/>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> “To Write Love on Her Arms.” Wikipedia entry.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To\\_Write\\_Love\\_on\\_Her\\_Arms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Write_Love_on_Her_Arms)

Emo artists and bands with members noted supporting the organization include The Rocket Summer, Underoath, Jimmy Eat World, and Paramore, among many others.<sup>92</sup> That the organization set up booths at the Vans Warped Tour also indicates that they consciously acknowledge their popularity among the emo kids. Their target audience is teenagers and young adults (as their Wikipedia entry indicates, “in October 2010, TWLOHR was part of a piece on CBS Morning News about preventing The Youngest Suicides”<sup>93</sup>), and emo(tional) youth at that are deemed particularly at risk, as well as particularly effective at spreading the positive message among their subculture and in their communities, as well.

After discovering the immense presence of To Write Love on Her Arms, I asked Paul specifically about the organization and its popularity within the emo subculture. At 24 years old, Paul was the oldest individual I interviewed. (Initially, from his appearance alone, I had judged him to be about 18-19 years old.) Even though he graduated from high school six years ago, Paul still dresses the part and participates in the emo lifestyle. He has never attended college and routinely spends time with individuals several years younger than him. He explained to me that,

Like all kids, I have been through rough times. I don't know very much about the organization, but I see shirts like 'Love is the Movement' and talk to friends and stuff, and it's kinda nice. I like it. I like knowing that there are people who care and show they care publicly by wearing these shirts. Even if I don't know someone, if I'm wearing one of their [the organization's] shirts and I see someone else in public wearing another one of their shirts, we kind of nod at each other [in recognition].

### **Disowning “Emo”**

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<sup>92</sup> “To Write Love on Her Arms.” Mibba News. <http://news.mibba.com/World/502/To-Write-Love-On-Her-Arms>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Emo's brush with the feminine in its openness to new masculinity, and therefore to perceived weakness, makes emo uncool to many individuals. However, also, in the emo subculture, there is a heavy emphasis placed on the authentic and a disdain for posers. This search becomes a fruitless quest for realness, however, as the emo kids are copying one another and even stereotypes. This perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces new norms of dress and behavior, and ultimately consists of individuals copying one another ceaselessly and denying it. The term "emo" becomes synonymous with "poser," and is thus considered trendy but uncool to many subcultures—interestingly, including to the emo subculture itself. They will, therefore, disown the term "emo"; by never claiming to be emo, but by labeling *others* as emo, the emo kid does not directly associate him- or herself with this troubling identity. To do so as George does is rare in the emo subculture. Furthermore, George establishes his identity as a "different" kind of emo than his poser friends' later in this section, further complicating his issue with this identity. The identity is lame and meaningless, yet, perplexingly to others, the emo kid *continues* to buy into it. For as long as there have been emo "fags" and "posers," there have continued to be individuals who "buy into" the subculture, joining it and making it "their own" while copying the looks of others who have joined before them.

This importance placed upon authenticity, in part, explains a possible connection that the emo youth can forge with the novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Its characters, though separated by now 20 years from modern readers, go through similar experiences, care about the same things, and fear the same things, with its wide range of topics dealing with rejection, loneliness, boredom, sex, drugs, family tension, and abuse.

Driving fast and listening to music with friends, as Charlie and his friends often do,<sup>94</sup> are typical teenage activities that help both the reader and the characters cope with the dramatic, sometimes melancholic events associated with teenage life and emotions. Thus, even though modern teenage readers are 20 years removed from Charlie's chronicled school year in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the book feels relevant to teenager's lives, as though Charlie's "coming of age" is similar to their own. At the very least, the story is believable—here again, emphasizing the importance, unclear though it truly is on a deeper level, in genuineness to emo kids. Though his future appears optimistic (at least, according to the narrator), Charlie, like the typical emo kid (as "former" emo kid Sandra emphasized) is *not* a finished product in the end. Perhaps ironically, Charlie never does mention what "perks" he has derived from being the wallflower he has been, and in fact indicates that there are not many, as he is hoping to change these tendencies ultimately. Though the typical emo kid reading this seemingly easily decipherable text, with its epistolary, plaintive style of writing, may not intentionally attempt to decipher the meaning, it is important to discover why this text is so relevant and important in the emo subculture.

Joni Richards Bodart writes that "YA [young adult] authors know they have a great responsibility because teens read their stories and respond to them. They have to tell the truth; if they didn't, teens would know and refuse to read them."<sup>95</sup> Chbosky does this throughout the novel, with the explicit details of sexual events—sometimes unwilling participation in sexual events—that outrage parents but are similar to many teenagers' experiences. He even offers a candid look into Charlie's taking drugs and having his own

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>95</sup> Joni Richards Bodart. "Books that Help, Books that Heal: Dealing with Controversy in YA Literature." *Young Adult Library Services*. (2006): 31-34. 33.

mental breakdown of sorts in the end, without offering judgment or reproach by simply telling the story. By revealing Charlie's perceived weaknesses, not only does the reader see the verisimilitude between their own lives and Charlie's, but they also see Charlie as representing a masculinity that is not full of stereotypical machismo expected in the heteronormative representation of teenage boys. Interestingly, Charlie's weaknesses are not a turnoff to the subculture who is constantly labeled as weak, either by being inauthentic or being not masculine enough. This further explains the gray areas and contradictions present within the identity of the members of the emo subculture.

Charlie repeatedly mentions his various crying spells throughout the novel, to which the other characters frequently tell him to stop his crying, beginning when his friend Michael commits suicide in middle school. He details these emotional releases unexpected of males on the second page of the novel ("I don't really remember much of what happened after that except that my older brother came to Mr. Vaughn's office in my middle school and told me to stop crying"<sup>96</sup>) and ending on the final page as he explains that "I was crying because I was suddenly very aware of the fact that it was me standing up in that tunnel with the wind over my face....And that was enough to make me feel infinite."<sup>97</sup> While his maleness was not penalized for crying at the end of the novel in this happy moment, his brother clearly admonishes him for crying and abandoning a sense of masculinity, even though a friend's suicide is clearly devastating enough to warrant emotional release.

The unabashed emotion and authenticity Chbosky displays in this novel allows teenagers to "put themselves into these books, gain insight and understanding, reach out

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen Chbosky. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Gallery Books, 1999. 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 213.

for help, and begin to recover.”<sup>98</sup> Teenagers admit that they love *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* for what they call its accurate depiction of real-life problems that teenagers encounter. As David Spitz of *Time* writes, “Now in its fourth printing, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has developed a cult following since it was released in February. ‘It reminded me of me and my friends, totally and completely,’ a teen reader reported on an AOL message board. Said another: ‘I don’t read books by choice too often, but I really loved this one.’”<sup>99</sup>

In fact, Amazon.com lists *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as its number one product on a page devoted to individuals looking for books appealing to the emo subculture. (Their actual page is called “So you’d like to...be an Indie/Emo Kid” and was written by Thep Robinson.) The short description for this text reads: “Perks of Being a Wallflower is just amazing. Chbosky’s ‘Charlie’ is both emotional and heartfelt. Great read for those of you struggling in high school.”<sup>100</sup> As of April 21, 2011, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* remains a highly-rated novel on Amazon.com, with 1,351 customer reviews and an average of 4.5 out of 5 stars provided by readers. Reviewer Michael Rogers writes:

When I finished *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chybosky, I sat there in a stunned silence. The book was strongly powerful in a manner that diary or letter style books rarely achieve. There is usually a sense of implausibility in those types of books that Charlie’s character completely negated. When trying to describe Charlie the mind suddenly reels, he’s honest. Completely and utterly genuine in his perceptions and most of his

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<sup>98</sup> Joni Richards Bodart. “Books that Help, Books that Heal: Dealing with Controversy in YA Literature.” *Young Adult Library Services*. (2006): 31-34. 33.

<sup>99</sup> David Spitz. “Books: Reads like Teen Spirit.” (1999). Time.com. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,991531,00.html>

<sup>100</sup> Robinson, Thep. “So you’d like to...be an Indie/Emo Kid.” Amazon.com. <http://www.amazon.com/gp/richpub/syltguides/fullview/3RYKQ14WP6UOB>

actions. Charlie is also an emotional basket case that somehow manages to attract a special group of friends to him.<sup>101</sup>

A reaction arguably similar to one Charlie himself may have had—and playing on the stereotypical image of emo teenagers—one reader even found himself crying after completing the novel, as he describes in a February 20, 2011 review of the novel:

I finished reading the book and started to cry. I don't know exactly why, but that was what I needed to do. Maybe I did so because it's really easy to create a strong bond with the character, and it's always sad to say good-bye. Or it might be because it made me think about my own life and the way I'm living it. Or the reason may be as simple as the fact that I loved each single sentence of it.<sup>102</sup>

Emo kids have no difficulty expressing their outright appreciation for this novel, even though its main character is depicted as sensitive and less traditionally masculine than the typical heteronormative male. It is not difficult to point to Charlie and determine that he would, in fact, likely be singled out for his emotional expressiveness if he were an actual person walking the halls of these teens' high schools, rather than existing only in the novel and in the readers' minds. Even though Chbosky does not use the word in the novel, Charlie is unquestionably an emo kid.

So why, then, would emo kids resist calling themselves emo, even though they revel in Chbosky's honest portrayal of an adolescent plagued with emotional difficulties? To begin to answer this question, it is important to understand why the term emo is so detested and embarrassing to emo kids, according to those who are immersed in the scene. Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley begin their introduction of emo in *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*, a book that is an obvious example of a text solidly placed within the subculture. (They add emo-credibility by displaying the

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<sup>101</sup> Amazon.com. "The Perks of Being a Wallflower: Review." [http://www.amazon.com/Perks-Being-Wallflower-Stephen-Chbosky/dp/0671027344/ref=cm\\_syf\\_dtl\\_top\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/Perks-Being-Wallflower-Stephen-Chbosky/dp/0671027344/ref=cm_syf_dtl_top_1)

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

following quote from Chris Carrabba of Dashboard Confessional on the book's cover: "[This is] a small, funny, and revealing book that's pretty much a must-read for kids in the scene.") Furthermore, Andy Greenwald writes the foreword for *Everybody Hurts*, establishing credibility with those reading the book by beginning with "The first time I heard the word 'emo' I laughed."<sup>103</sup> This sentence is meant to affect the reader meaningfully and also give pause to the reader. After all, it is not only intended to create an initial surprise for the reader at a writer making fun of emo *in an emo book*, but also importantly, the sentence stands alone. The sentence is not merely the introduction to a paragraph, but rather owns a single line all its own which then leads into a new full paragraph. The reader is forced to pause after the initial sentence, if not out of genuine reflection of the definition of emo (and why it would cause Greenwald to laugh), but also because of the physical structure of the text on the page. Simon and Kelley clearly intend for the readers to realize that their book is grounded within the scene, with their placing Carrabba's and Greenwald's seals of approval and inclusion into the text.

Others, however, do not find the word emo as laughable as Andy Greenwald does. Sam, for example, explained angrily that "even the kids who say they are 'emo' don't know what the fuck they're talking about or where that term came from and who created that term in the first place." While Sam's anger was palpable as he continued railing against the emo subculture, and the term emo in general, he did admit his own bias likely stems from being called an "emo faggot" in high school, based on his music preferences, which he claims were not even mainstream emo in the first place. This created more frustration for Sam, who cites original emo bands such as Rites of Spring as examples of

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<sup>103</sup> Leslie Simon and Trevor Kelley. *Everybody Hurts: An Essential Guide to Emo Culture*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). iv.

emo music he did listen to, thus indicating that being a “follower” of emo, a “poser” adhering to the now-mainstream fad of emo in his peers’ eyes, was an insult. While I am not suggesting that Sam, or really anyone, is absolutely an emo kid through and through with no other conflicting personality traits or characteristics that distinguish him- or herself from others, Sam fits the following “emo independent” description. According to Brian Bailey:

The slippery part of describing Emo lies in the contradiction that was inherently created when Emo started appearing in mainstream media outlets. The newfound popularity threatened the original intentions of Emo music participants, which focused on genuine feelings, grassroots sentiments, and a rejection of mainstream music through independent labels and small, local music venues....The first [group] could be labeled as “Emo Independents”; those that reject the mainstream bands and styles associated with Emo. The other group is often known as the “Emo mainstream”; the fragment of the subculture that embraces Emo despite its growing popularity and subsequent corporate product.<sup>104</sup>

Greenwald confronts the problem of emo identification directly as he explains that the problem with the label is that “emo is a lame word. Why would anyone in their right mind choose to be called something so silly, reductive, and confusing?”<sup>105</sup> He admits that while the term emo is not a particularly attractive identifier for public discourse, “everyone knows who [the emo kids] are, but no one admits anything and no one likes talking about it in public.”<sup>106</sup> While there are surely exceptions to this “rule,” as I have found in my research from speaking with individuals who identify currently or formerly as emo, Greenwald correctly identifies the difficulty of getting emo bands and kids to speak directly about what it means to be emo. Even George, who told me

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<sup>104</sup> Brian Bailey. “Emo Music and Youth Culture.” *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Youth Culture*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005. 1-9. 3-4.

<sup>105</sup> Andy Greenwald. *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*. (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003), 4.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

repeatedly throughout our conversations that he had no qualms about representing himself and identifying as emo, explains the difficulty in proclaiming his “emo-ness” loudly and proudly among all individuals. When I mentioned the elusiveness and embarrassment often associated with the term “emo,” he explained the following to me:

I know that *you* aren't going to judge me [for calling myself emo and talking about being emo], but... that's not always the case with everyone I know. When I was a junior [in high school, last year] I would hear my friends who were seniors talking about how lame the emo kids were. And here I was...wearing my Converse shoes and dying my hair black and I just felt...lame.

One band frequently identified and listened to among the emo music scene is Say Anything. Say Anything's song “Admit It!” seems to be speaking directly to a stereotypical member of the emo subculture, albeit an adult. Lyrics from “Admit It!” focus on the importance an individual (the one the singer is speaking to) places on appearance at the risk of being superficial:

Despite your pseudo-bohemian appearance/And vaguely leftist doctrine of beliefs/You know nothing about art or sex/That you couldn't read in any trendy New York underground fashion magazine/Prototypical non-conformist.... Well let me tell you this/I am shamelessly self-involved/I spend hours in front of the mirror, making my hair elegantly disheveled/I worry about how this album will sell/Because I believe it will determine the amount of sex I will have in the future/I self medicate with drugs and alcohol to treat my extreme social anxiety.

Interestingly, the song's title also demands that the listener “admit it.” As I will explain further, one of the qualities about the emo subculture is the refusal to “admit it,” to identify as emo and admit what one “is” or portrays him- or herself to be, as well as the subculture that he or she belongs to. Say Anything confronts this emo kid by first attacking his or her “shameless self-involve[ment]” but then the singer admits to his own

fixation on appearance, as well as the irony of being a “prototypical” non-conformist in that he conforms to the emo subculture in a predictable manner.

It is important to determine what membership in this subculture means for its participants. Wilkins claims that “the negotiations between [social] constraints and solutions...shape[s] the cultural meanings young people give to gender, race, and class.”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Wilkins claims, these kids want to be accepted, liked, and thought of as original: “They want to see themselves and be seen as authentic, not as fake or ‘posers.’”<sup>108</sup>

The same heralding of authenticity resolutely holds true for the emo kids, even though, as Sandra described previously, “former” emo kids often see their younger selves and the current emo kids as “phony, just following along with whatever trends that will hold,” as she claimed. Neal echoed this sentiment as he talked with me about the fads in the subculture: “Most teenagers, in my experience, are attracted to fads and specific fashions, and emo behavior along with the dress style is part of the culture that they adhere too. It is no different to me than teenage punks, teenage preps, or any other subculture.”

Neal’s belief that many emo boys act in these ways to “appear” to be something that they are not is in particular contrast with the emo ethical belief in the importance of being “authentic” and being accepted for being the emotional being that one is, whether male or female. This is one aspect in which the emo subculture is complicated and often seemingly contradictory. One possible explanation for emo male kids believing in the importance of “appearing” sensitive is that they are potentially adhering to what they

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<sup>107</sup> Amy C. Wilkins. *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

believe they are “supposed” to be. I will explore both the new masculinities offered by the emo males, as well as the question of authenticity, in the following two sections.

Jon agreed with Neal’s earlier comment that emo boys did seem to have less of an interest in traditional male values and activities, that the “ones at [his] school did not play sports.” An intelligent young adult who had time to reflect on the emo subculture from his days in high school since his 2006 graduation, Jon agreed with earlier sources that emo kids “dressed this way because the bands they listened to dressed this way. It also represented a rebellion against the rigid gender roles placed on them by the patriarchal middle class social system: tight clothes are for girls, sports are for boys.” When I asked George about the importance of being genuine in the emo subculture, he replied, “Even though the emphasis was on being indie and cool and real and unique...man, sometimes emo kids wear the same stuff as each other. I don’t, but my friends do sometimes.” This seems to be a constant belief among the emo kids: *I am unique and authentic, but “the [other] emo kids” are not.* What truly differentiates George and Sandra (“former” emo kid) from other emo kids? While they protest to be different, George did not display any behaviors or say anything that indicated his originality, while Sandra never distinguished herself physically from the emo kids. Their adamant protestations were the only pieces of evidence they offered that they were not posers, and for Sandra, not even emo at all. George was, in fact, the only emo kid who actually sought to define himself in an outright manner as emo, likely because he identified more with the emotional aspect of being an emo kid than the stylishness emo kids often seek.

George proves to have been somewhat of an anomaly in my research as compared to the other individuals whom I interviewed and observed, yet he is paradoxically quite

similar in his claims that he is unique. To be emo is to strive for authenticity, often by imitating others who also strive for authenticity and by doing so, replicate those who they have also deemed “authentic.” Rather than forging paths of uniqueness, the individuals simply copy one another, and thus the whole identity of the subculture is at stake. To be a “poser” in emo is to be disrespected, yet there is no way to *be* emo without imitating someone. This makes the identity of the group and of emo kids in particular complex, multilayered, and complicated at best, and inauthentic and unoriginal at worst. The one way to resist this sense that one is unoriginal in a subculture where originality is to resist that one is even *in* such a subculture at all, or at least to verbalize the resistance.

## **Conclusion**

The emo subculture, though it is quite a contested space within which to place oneself, consists of multiple facets. While they are certainly not the first group to do so, the emo kids certainly embrace alternative expressions of masculinities, rather than the one-size-fits-all variety of athletic, muscular males fueled by testosterone-driven behavior and expectations, at least at the current moment in time in American culture. What they—both male and female emo kids—do face is the challenge of going beyond the emo kid status that is often derogatory in nature, even though some seem able to enact this persona out in virtual space, much more readily than in physical public spaces. Regardless of the kinds of space within which emo kids interact with one another and with the world, the fact is that there *is* a place for them to enact in this type of emotion-driven behavior. Finally, even though they often resist the label of emo, emo kids are

easily identifiable and unmistakably “emo,” which can be determined by both those outside and within the subculture.

I began this project with a specific focus on the gender roles of the male emo kid, attempting to determine whether the emo males were transcending masculinity or participating in a new masculinity. Ultimately, I have found that something of a blend is taking place in the emo subculture: emo kids, like the musical genre of emo itself, are ultimately reacting to other subcultures and are reflecting a need for differentiation from the norm, a purposeful alienation that (though the following sounds somewhat contradictory) includes and welcomes others who wish to distinguish themselves, as well. These desires and actions are nothing new, as can be noted from witnessing the participants in both punk and glam rock, both of which musical genres predated emo. Emo provides an outlet for youth, both males and females, to transcend or transgress the American youth norm or expectation of dress and behavior typical of the gender roles by creating their own typical gender dress and behavior. While they are not behaving in queer ways in that they are not creating new genders or eschewing their genders (at least as a subcultural generalization), the mostly middle-class males of the emo scene find a means to extend their own personalities into this subculture and to differentiate themselves as emo.

Ultimately, this attempt to redefine oneself is self-defeating, since its members end up creating new boxes or categories within which to define themselves as males, females, and emo kids. Furthermore, there becomes a “genuine” means of emotional expression and gender/sexuality exploration that is not even truly authentic, as Neal has illustrated in “Emo Boys Kissing: Each Other and Girls.” Sexual exploration that is

meant to be a public event, such as “Jake’s” girlfriend encouraging him to kiss his male friend at a party, is not exploration for its own sake, but rather is merely an attempt to fit in with yet another group. The difference between choosing to fit in with the heteronormative, traditionally masculine group and the emo subculture is simply the choice of which one is more appealing. While emo does offer a space within which to be an emotionally expressive male, this is a complex, contested space, in the same way that teenagers are complex and create their own contestations of themselves: as Sandra indicated, some individuals seek out emo as a means of finding themselves, but ultimately they end up “finding” themselves once they have used and gone through emo.

Furthermore, because the word “emo” itself is so contested as an identifier, it is difficult to pinpoint a description of emo that would satisfy every single individual who either claims to be emo or whom others would describe as emo. What ultimately became a point for further research is an exploration into the actual contested nature of emo itself: with its focus on new exploration of masculinities and emotional connection and introspection, whether expressed by George or by Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, emo is, quite frankly, an easy target. Like term “fag” with its hot-potato quality, as Pascoe notes, it can become a term with which no one wants to associate due to its diminishing properties and its ability to make an individual feel weak and less-than. It has been interesting to note the limits of the emo masculinity: while these males are drawn to the emo subculture, which indicates their desire to express emotions in a way that is less traditionally masculine, there is still a limit to which the emo male can push before he becomes negatively labeled an “emo fag” or “so emo,” often by other males but certainly not only by other males, as Neal and others I interviewed described to me.

What has been interesting is to discover the ambiguity that is present within emo, both as a term and as an acceptable and appropriate genre of music, style of dress, and even lifestyle for modern youth. While this has made the research challenging to conduct at times, particularly because it has been easier to derive serious answers from individuals when they are not around their peers (and most teenagers, a majority of whom make up the emo subculture, spend copious amounts of time in public with their peers, rather than alone), it is important because anything that pushes against boundaries of any kind is worth exploring, both *why* it pushes and what could potentially occur as a result of its pushing. With the emo subculture, androgynous hairstyles and clothing options perhaps indicate a future of gender equality that is more prevalent than in the past. A generation of individuals who believe that it is actually *not* transgressive to maintain the same hairstyle as or to share clothing with your opposite-sex partner could ultimately mean that the genders are less divided and that behavior and dress is less confining as a whole in society. Ultimately, the emo subculture provides an interesting perspective into what it means to be an emo(tional) teenager or young adult, including being an inclusive community that welcomes the emotional release found in emo songs and enjoyed by emo fans, both male and female. It is important to continue studying this subculture because they offer an insight into a group of people who find softer emotions and expressions among one another important, as well as offering legitimate spaces for individuals to express themselves in ways that they may be unable to outside of the subculture.

### Research Participants

The following list consists of individuals with whom I interviewed during the research process. All individuals understood that their names would be changed and that their participation was completely voluntary.

Neal—Neal was one of the most helpful participants with whom I interacted. As I mentioned in the introduction, I found Neal via a friend's recommendation. He is a 19-year-old self-identified homosexual emo kid who shared much with me about the emo subculture, how he felt within the subculture as a gay male, and how he perceived the trend of emo boys kissing.

Anna—22-year-old Anna never called herself an emo kid during our conversation, but she seemed pleasant and easygoing when referencing the emo subculture as one she was not far removed from when she was in high school. "Oh yeah, the emo kids were really popular," she told me, laughing a little bit. "Everyone dated or had a crush on an emo boy at least once in high school." I approached her in a public shopping center because she seemed friendly, young, and fairly trendy, with a few visible and stylish tattoos and a bold, asymmetrical haircut, though she did not dress overtly emo.

George—George was the youngest of all the people I interviewed. At 18 years old, George told me that he recently graduated from high school in May 2011. Any individual who saw George out in public could immediately identify him as an emo kid. With black hair sweeping across one side of his face, a lip piercing, tight gray pants, and a black and

gray striped t-shirt, George had an innocent approach to our topics of conversation and described himself as emo—as in, “emotional and sensitive,” as his introductory statement explains. George was a fascinating person to talk to who was able to provide relevant information about the emo subculture because he had only two months previously graduated from a high school in Cobb County, Georgia.

Sandra—22-year-old Sandra seemed to have the most anger out of all the individuals I interviewed. Sandra looked completely like an emo kid with her lip piercing, tattoos, and haircut, yet she described herself as having been formerly emo. By expressing her contempt for her former emo self and for current emo kids, she explained that it is the fact that emo seems “immature” and perhaps indicates a lack of direction for the individual participating in the subculture.

Jon—When I spoke with 22-year-old Jon, I could immediately discern that he was an intelligent individual who found the historical and psychological aspect of the project most fascinating. He helped me better understand the reaction of the emo subculture to predominant images of masculinity circulating at the time of its beginning. Jon dressed in a way best described as “emo-lite” (much like how Bailey described emo as gothic-lite). The most obvious thing that stood out about Jon to me were his oversized dark-rimmed glasses. Because of Jon’s serious demeanor and his wanting to steer the conversation into a more detached, historical approach, rather than analyze his own motives for dressing emo, I decided not to inquire about the glasses. He told me that one older woman told him that upon meeting him she was “afraid” of his look and mentioned his glasses as

being a part of that. While I did not understand what caused him to look so intimidating that a woman would be “afraid” upon meeting him, particularly in that he did not even seem to be fully emerged in the emo lifestyle (as he did not have an emo haircut, dyed hair, or visible piercings or tattoos), I did understand that these glasses were the first thing people noticed about Jon and could be quite distracting.

Paul—Paul, at 24 years old, was an interesting individual to interview. As I indicated in the section “Cutting,” I initially thought that Paul was an older teenager, perhaps around 18 or 19 years of age. He is a short individual, about 5’5 or 5’6, and he wore emo clothing. When I expressed my shock at his age, Paul laughed good-naturedly and explained that he “gets that a lot” and that he spends time with people who have recently graduated from high school and still “feels like I’m in high school sometimes.” Paul lives at home with his parents and works part-time at a local pizza restaurant and has never attended college.

Farah—At 21 years old, Farrah has short dark hair that she later told me she spends a lot of money on upkeep every month and a large number of tattoos placed all throughout her body, including on her calves, chest, neck, and ear. Farrah explained to me that she does not enjoy identifying with the label “emo” but that she accepts it and understands why she is referred to as emo. She also told me that even her parents know that she is considered an emo kid. Farrah was an excellent resource in providing me with information on how local emo kids view Swayze’s. While she does not currently attend Swayze’s regularly for shows, she did when she was in high school.

Lucy—20-year-old Lucy identified as emo, but stated that her faith in Christianity was “the most important thing about” her. She did not mind talking about the boys, but particularly did not want to discuss in depth the boys’ kissing, due to her belief that “I don’t judge [individuals participating in homosexual activities], but I think it’s wrong, according to the Bible.” Lucy also explained to me that she was a nursing student who wanted to help people in her career and that “weird, gross things don’t bother me, like blood and stuff.” I found it interesting that Lucy had such a contradictory viewpoint on things she deemed “gross”; she could tolerate bodily fluids yet the thought of homosexuality was not acceptable to her. She seemed very nice and genuinely curious about the project, however.

Kathie—Kathie, a reserved but friendly 21-year-old whom I interviewed at Hot Topic, dressed the part of the emo girl: tight pants, a Manchester Orchestra band tee shirt, and side swept hair. Katie was especially helpful as she described what “straight edge” meant to emo kids and how it was an important facet to the emo subculture that I had almost overlooked when beginning the research for this project.

Bailey—At 21 years old, Bailey was an interesting individual to interview. I initially decided to ask Bailey to talk with me because I noticed her bright green hair. She, like Jon, wore dark-rimmed glasses, but hers were much more subdued and seemed actually necessary for vision, rather than a fashionable accessory. Bailey had no visible tattoos or

piercings but did wear all black clothing and carried a large black messenger bag displaying a bright purple lightning bolt.

Sam—Sam is a student in Dr. Whitlock’s undergraduate Queer Studies class who expressed outrage at the emo subculture, and perhaps for individuals who even consider themselves “emo” or consider it to be an actual subculture. Though I disagree with Sam’s belief that the emo subculture does not exist and is not worth pursuing in research, his comments were especially thought-provoking for me because he admitted his own bias stemmed from being labeled as an “emo faggot” in high school.

Field Notes—3/12/11

Swayze's—6:13 PM

Outside of Swayze's (costs \$10 to get in) —probably close to 20 emo kids, all around 15-18 years old hanging out—interesting: I see two kids hugging in the parking lot—long hug where it kind of looks like they are dancing—at first, I think it's two guys because the hair is the same and the clothes are the same but it's actually a guy and a girl. Both had long hair and skin-tight jeans.

Another couple—a guy and a girl. The guy is not in the stereotypical emo dress—has short hair, baggier shirt (still a band tee) and khakis. Girl has dyed black hair, blunt bangs, glasses, and emo clothes: brown medium messenger bag swung over left side of body.

Bigger group of emo kids—about 8-10—one with baggier yellow shirt and tight-fitting jeans; one with black hoodie over a cap, hands in pockets the entire time he talks, bright orange belt. More animated—makes punching gestures. Another guy is making punching gestures and fighting gestures at this same guy; they keep doing it back and forth. Unable to hear conversation.

One girl walks in with a brown messenger bag slung over right shoulder. Dress. Tattoo on back of right calf.

Group of three kids—all about 15-16 years of age—two appear to be of Latino/Hispanic descent—one wears a tie-dye shirt, gray khaki shorts, and sneakers with electric green thick shoelaces. The other has a band tee on and gray pants. They are talking to a kid with a flannel shirt, glasses, and light brown hair with an emo swoop and Converse sneakers. They stand about the same distance apart as would be expected from young males.

Kids constantly filtering in and out, even though it is now 6:24 and the show began around 5:00 PM. Group of kids parks next to me then walks up and hug and high five people outside. A few groups seem now to intermingle now that this group of kids has come up. This place seems to create an environment specifically geared toward high school kids to let them have a place to hang out and to play for one another.

People (band members?) constantly bringing instruments out—drums, cymbal, etc.

Two emo kids from earlier are walking with their arms around each other's necks, then grab each other's arms. Actually, I'm not entirely sure if the one I thought was a guy is or not. Emo swoop of hair, very tight jeans, and black Converse shoes. Now a guy is hugging that person—I think it might be a girl. Two guys are standing with these two girls.

A few kids are smoking cigarettes or drinking from plastic cups (maybe 1-2 in the whole group). Lots of kids, including the one I thought was a guy, have streaks of color in their hair—one girl walking past has a pink streak in her blonde hair (3-5 inches in length), the other girl has a bright blonde streak in dark brown hair.

Lots of dark color interspersed with bright colored t-shirts and pops of color in dark shoes, like the shoelaces or on the tops of shoes.

Swayze's has put cones specifically in the first three parking spots in front of the venue so that kids can congregate outside. No one here appears to be over the age of 17-18. Guys are being physical with one another—fake fighting, then hugging to make up.

That same two kids—I am still not entirely sure of whether the one is a guy or a girl, I'm kind of thinking it's a guy now—are extremely physical with one another. Hugging, dancing, bumping fists. The guy puts the girl's finger in his mouth and she wipes it on another guy's shirt. He sneaks up behind her and hugs her even though she is talking to two other guys. She is interested in a third guy's hoodie—it looks like she is lighting it on fire. Yep, I'm pretty sure it's a guy now. This is an interesting group. The one girl is in the middle. She tries to walk away but the guy hugs her from behind and latches onto her. They walk inside.

Same two guys from earlier are fake punching one another. Now a third one throws a fake punch at one in a purple hoodie and khaki shorts. Plugs in ears.

There is a LOT of hugging here. One very short girl hugs a tall guy with long hair in a backwards cap. They are both decked out in black but it's definitely an emo black and not goth.

Lots of fake hitting among the guys. One guy picks up one of the cones used by Swayze's to prevent parking in the front. What's up with all the fake punching? Black is definitely the main color of clothing among these kids.

One white guy walks in with a girl of color—can't tell if she is black or possibly Indian (from India). Other than that, everyone is white except for maybe 3-4 kids who look like they have Hispanic descent but they still seem like English is their first language. Two of the non-white emo kids stick together in a group but they are joined by 3 white emo kids.

One guy with emo hair sits on another guy's lap—the guy is the one with purple hoodie, khaki shorts, and plugs in ears that kept punching at another guy. He gets up quickly and stands to face the other guy. They are both wearing purple hoodies. Parent drops off a girl and the guy in the purple hoodie welcomes her with a big hug. That guy seems to be popular among the circuit of emo kids. He is probably of Hispanic descent.

Group of guys walks up and gets into the car next to me. The kid that was sitting in the guy's lap has a face full of piercings—septum, nostril, eyebrow, etc. Couldn't see as clearly before. They are loud and peel away quickly.

The same guy and girl from earlier are walking across the parking lot. His hands are in his pockets. She walks in an opposite direction of him and he follows. Another girl comes up to him and they hug a long embrace—at least 30 seconds. She pats his back about 5-6 times, seemingly to let him go, and he finally lets go. She reaches to hug another guy in a group who has come up—he jumps into her arms (they are both short but he is maybe an inch taller), kicking his legs up in a feminine way.

ANOTHER girl is hugging a guy who is smaller than her and picking him up, carrying him. She does this several times, then he leans down and kisses her and she puts him back on the ground. She does it again. Later, she stands in front of him and he leans his elbows on her shoulders, resting on her.

Lots of band tees, facial piercings, emo hair, bracelets, bandanas, black nail polish on both girls and guys. The kids are driving nice, middle- and upper-middle class cars gifted by their parents—nicer than mine! Newer Civics and Accords, SUVs.

Swayze's is a discrete venue with a barber shop on one side of it and a graphic design place on the other. It has other shops like a chiropractor, pawn shop, a nail shop, a catering shop, and a food shop. It seems like it was put right here in the middle of all this stuff to cater to parents' desires that their kids are safe. A lot of the concerts begin early—for example, it's Saturday, March 12, 2011 and the concert began at 5PM. Seems to be marketed directly at high school kids, specifically emo kids. The website mentions emo music.

That group of guys (including one with purple hoodie, khakis, and plugs in ears) has come back. They bought food from Wendy's. Another reason this venue makes sense for middle class emo kids—they have money to spend on food out, they can choose from ample parking for those old enough to drive or carpool.

Lots of hugging—random hugging, at least one hug witnessed every minute, often more. They seem very physically affectionate with one another, grooming one another, running and chasing one another, fake punching, hugging, leaning on one another, dancing in parking lot. Standing very close together. Constant hugging, both around waist and around shoulders. Kids intermingle among different groups but there are constantly about 5 different groups outside, even though they go in and out of the venue, other shops in area/walking around parking lot, and leaving and returning in their cars.

I have seen probably more than 50 emo kids, between all the cycling in and out, and I have only noticed 3-4 who did not have very white skin (not much tanning going on here), even though none appear to be what I would classify as not middle class—shoes, clothing, jewelry/accessories, cars, piercings and tattoos (they cost money).

Same couple as before—the girl was carrying the guy (I assume it's a guy, still only about 90% sure) on her back, piggy-back style. They are walking away from the venue holding hands. Both seem relaxed.

3/18/11 6:30 PM

Just showed up to Swayze's. Significantly fewer kids outside right now than last time. I wonder if the previous band had a bigger draw of fans. So far, I haven't noticed any of the main kids that I remember from last time, but these kids dress the same way: some of the guys are in tight shirts and pants, others are dressed more grunge with baggier, black shirts and khakis.

Lots of black here too with pops of color in hair, shoelaces, bracelets, or necklaces. Bandanas on wrists and in hair (girls')

The one thing I've noticed a lot of so far is a lot of male-to-male touching. Fake punches, pretend butt grabs (one male just grabbed another male's butt and fake-ran off laughing while the others in group—7 kids total—laughed too)—the kid whose butt got grabbed just shrugged it off, no big deal.

Honda Accord just pulled up and dropped off 3 emo kids. Mom is younger looking, wearing sunglasses even though it's kind of cloudy.

Of the 25+ kids hanging out right now, only one is black and the rest are white.

Very loud crowd tonight. I can hear their shouting even though I am in my car and was not able to park directly in front this time the way I was last time.

Boy and girl walk by holding hands. Girl is taller than boy. Boy is leaning against girl as they stand side by side after they come up to crowd of same group of kids from earlier (with the butt grabbing pair)

Girl leaves boy to hug other guys in the group. She is now the only girl in the 9-person group. All guys' hugs are friendly and seem respectful—i.e. no inappropriate touching or lingering, friendly smiles, etc.

Boy hugs the other boys, too. One boy just shakes his hand. The boy who shakes his hand is very short with tie and dark glasses on, navy blue sweater, grayish-green khaki pants. Why did this boy choose to just shake the other boy's hand when it was clear that he was going against the grain—teenagers not necessarily known to do that—when all the other boys were hugging? He hugged the girl, though. All boys hugging the girl.

Boys fake punching a lot—is this a teenager thing? With the boys I'm observing today, contact never comes between the fist and the chest (or wherever the guy is punching—I've seen several chests as targets and a couple of shoulders, and one face). One kid:

gently taps the other boy rather than full-on punching, though aims with speed as though he is going to full-on punch the boy.

Lots of boys sitting on curbs then other boys come up and sit in their laps. One pair from earlier (fake punch to chest): boy who was fake punched sits on other boy's lap. Can't tell if one is more dominant than the other because they both exhibit masculine behaviors: throwing things (pens, things from pockets—can't tell—etc.) at others, running around, hugging girls, etc.

New guy sitting outside (taking payments to get inside). Looks bored. Older than patrons. Maybe mid- to late-20s. Shaved head, glasses, all black clothes—black t-shirt and pants. Black and white checked tennis shoes with bright pink laces. Interesting style choice—the pop of color.

Two girls talking to guy sitting outside. Relaxed postures, friendly touches on shoulder (girls touching him)—seem to know him. Girls look to be 16-18—bandana around wrist on one (red), white bandana around hair on other. Both black clothing, tight shirts.

Only two kids smoking out of ~18 that are outside now. Influx of people moving in and out more quickly than last time. Are kids not smoking because they are non-smokers, because they are not 18 and cannot buy cigarettes, other reasons?

Group of kids leave and go to Wendy's down the road. Saw this last time. I think this is a common thing to do. When these kids are driving they are “peeling out” in their cars—driving fast, esp. when in groups of 3+. Showing off. This group of kids is just males.

No supervision here other than guy taking money outside. Wonder if he is trained to be a bouncer. Do kids get in fights outside here ever, or is this considered a safer, amicable space? Will investigate further for capstone—if so, what makes it amicable? Is it the draw of the same crowd? Would expect there would still be disagreements, fighting, etc. How is Swayze's prepared, esp. with so many minors as patrons (and parents they have to please, safety regulations to follow, etc.)?

Band members (?) bring out instruments—guitar, drums—and kids don't pay them attention

Bands maybe are secondary here—focus (at least for the kids in the parking lot) seems to be on hanging out, socializing, being with friends and significant others, flirting, touching.

3/19/11 6:36 PM

Lots of facial piercings so far—septum, large gauges in ears, lips (common—to the side, rather than labret piercings, which I think were more popular in the 90s and early 2000s)

Long emo hair on one guy. He gets out of car next to me. Kids who get out of car with him (both males, around his age, maybe 16-17) are joking about his hair with him. I hear one with long, shoulder-length hair say to the kid, "Your new hair is getting all the ladies, dude." Guess this kid just got emo haircut. Wonder if I should talk to hairstylists to see what kids ask for when they get this haircut—do they bring in pics of music icons, other emo kids found through google/flickr/etc.? Emo hair kid's response: "Dude, shut up." Laughter. This brushing aside of the topic = he isn't comfortable with a direct/overt emo association? Or with attracting "the ladies"? Don't want to make assumption of sexuality, either—could be gay, straight, bi.

Girl walks by with tattoo on calf—from my notes on first day, I think this is the same girl. Couldn't see the tattoo on first day of observation—still can't tell exactly what it is, even though I'm closer. Looks kind of tribal. This is an unusual tattoo for emo crowd. They tend to have portraits, big sleeves with flowers and texts, random tattoos. Tribals tend to be made fun of, but this girl's is large and on her calf (unusual size and place for tribal tattoo—usually smaller to medium size and on arm on guys or back)

About 30+ kids outside right now.

Big group of kids—11. 7 boys, 4 girls. Seems to be a lot of male interaction outside rather than divided evenly. This group—boy going around to all the girls, hugging on one for a few moments then moving to the next. Girls do not seem to care. Prob not anyone's boyfriend in particular, just touchy guy. Girls don't seem to be bothered by him.

Lots of kids in zip-up hoodies even though weather is in 60-70s. Bright colors—one yellow and black stripes, one black with electric green/teal graphics and text.

Two girls walk by from the Swayze's parking lot to the food shop—"tiger stripe" in hair. Both brown hair but dyed blonde in ~3-4 inch sections in front with black stripe down, so looks like tiger. Both on left side of head, framing face. Linked arms.

Guy comes up to these girls with tiger stripes and follows them. Stands on far side (away from my car), very polite, friendly, doesn't interrupt girls or become overly physical with them

Again, lots of hugging as greeting, as just random acts, etc. Prob at least one hug every minute. Boys to boys, boys to girls, and girls to girls (though surprisingly—to me, anyway—girl to girl hugging is much less common in this crowd at this time).

Diff types of accessories I see: leopard print bracelets (thick, round, and hard-plastic looking), long earrings (one girl—blue feathers that go halfway down to shoulders. On boys—interesting—folded bandanas in back pockets (this is a trend I remember from high school), sweat bands (?) around wrists, and bright colored shoelaces.

Haven't noticed an obviously gay/lesbian/queer couple yet at all—even though this environment seems a little looser on gender expectations.

Friday—July 1<sup>st</sup>

I just pulled up to Swayze's. About 30 kids outside right now. There is an employee taking money for kids to go inside. Concert hasn't started yet because I see band members pulling instruments out of a black van. Looks like some kids are helping—could be friends or could just be people who want to help the band.

These 30 kids seem to be formed in about 4 different groups, with a few individuals moving from group to group. Not constant groups. Also some kids are leaving the parking lot while others are going inside the venue, etc. ~30 consistent number at the moment, with slightly more males than females.

Observation of indiv. clothing: Two girls holding hands wearing feathers in their hair and laughing, both wearing tight black jeans and one is wearing a blue shirt, the other a rainbow shirt. Fingers are interlaced and they break away from embrace to hug. Wonder if that is significant—could be a Pride shirt? No text, just rainbow. One girl walks up to these girls—short, dark, almost 80s hair (reminds me of Kristen Stewart's hair in the movie *The Runaways*)—she's wearing a *My Little Pony* shirt. The girls seem content laughing and talking among themselves. The girls are no longer holding hands (orig. two girls)

A guy and a girl walk up to these 3 girls. What is he doing? Grabbing at one girl's shoulders then smiling/flirting with another girl. Girls seem happy, no jealous, maybe just friends (all)? One of hand-holding girls walks off with him after 3-4 mins of talking—walking toward food shop

Group of 6 males, all with black (dyed?) hair except 1—redhead. Three boys wearing khaki shorts, "cargo" style—doesn't seem very "emo" but others are wearing skinny jeans—seems to be some leeway in style but one looks = distinctly emo. Wonder if khaki wearers sometimes wear skinny jeans (and vice versa). Passing one soda between 3 kids. Diet Pepsi Max (weird!) Just speculation: Does it have alcohol in it?? Boys not acting strange—concerned with weight or just drinking it for some reason? All are thin or average build except for one, only slightly overweight

Predicted age range of these kids—16-19.

Older man (Dad?) drops off kid (son?) in Ford Escape. Boy leans in to give dad hug and quick kiss on the cheek. Goes straight inside even though band is still setting up. Brown hair, longish, black tight pants and hoodie, even though it's July and estimated 80-90 degrees even though it's just after 6:40 PM

Kids pulling up in red Civic—looks new (not sure year). Music blaring very loud, hardcore? Not sure of band

More kids going in now for concert—still ~20 kids outside, groups not nec. Stable but still moving around, some seem to stay entire time of show—do they come for music or socialization more? Seems music is important to some – I see one kid come out to his car

for something—book, can't read cover—but I have never seen him outside yet—dirty blond hair peeking out of black cap, tight black pants, and pink t-shirt

Count of pink t-shirts in guys: 3 outside (plus that one who just went back inside)

Count of pink t-shirts in girls: 2

Most popular color—black

Unusual hair color (dye) count: 2 feathers in hair, pink highlights (girl)—1, blue highlights—1, purple—2—no all-color dye on head, just highlights on these people

Saturday—July 2<sup>nd</sup>

Fewer kids than yesterday outside, 15-16 (going in and out of venue, cars, etc.)

Crowd seems a little older than yesterday, maybe 17-18 mostly

Main groups, backs to one another: Three boys (1 group), Five boys and two girls (2<sup>nd</sup> group), 3 girls and 2 boys (3<sup>rd</sup> group), few stragglers in between

One boy punching another boy in group 1—what is this about? Not OVERLY aggressive punch, not serious but joking—girls in group 2 laughing at group 1

Boys and girls not overly flirtatious with one another in group 3, just seem to be hanging out and enjoying each other's company

One boy coming out of venue and going into group 1—boys in that group in the following styles: band t-shirts (3 boys) and one Love is the Movement shirt (*edited to include: found out later that this was part of the To Write Love on Her Arms organization*), two in caps, one with skateboard at his feet, playing with it but not riding it a lot, two in khaki shorts and one in khaki pants, other in skinny jeans

Boy who came out from venue goes to truck (first truck I've seen in parking lot! Kind of nicer truck: Chevy Silverado, seems strange and very “un-emo” –like) and brings out a CD to group. Hands CD to boy in khaki pants, nods in approval and shakes hand of kid who brought him CD, hand shake seems a bit over-exaggerated but still friendly

Observations of friendly/physical interactions:

Two girls (16-17?) arrive together in car: hold hands as they walk in, swinging arms back and forth—is it common for girls to hold hands?

!!As the girls approach the entrance, guy (short and thin, maybe 17) comes out and grabs and kisses one of the girls. She kisses him back then pushes at his chest playfully—seems to be boyfriend. Hand-holding was just affectionate, boy doesn't seem bothered by it at all, hugs her friend too

In group 1: Guys holding hands for a moment, other guy pushes them—is this a case of being “too” physically affectionate? Other guys laugh in response, two guys holding hands then grab each other and pretend to kiss and all the guys laugh.

Girls come out to sit on the sidewalk. Long conversation, no touching, but sitting very close. Guy comes up and sits on the lot in the part where the cones are blocking the parking spots, facing the two girls. No laughing, just talking. Guy picks up stick and starts “drawing” on the street while talking to the girls. One girl (one who seems to be mostly listening) wearing LOTS of bracelets: purple, blue, pink, yellow. Other girl gesturing animatedly with hands and guy just looking—backwards hat, tight white shirt and black pants—more pockets than usually seen in skinny jeans—maybe spec. for guys (these pants) vs. skinny jeans sometimes found in girls' department of stores or borrowed from girl friends, etc.

Friday, July 9<sup>th</sup>

A few more couples here today than I've noticed so far. All heterosexual pairings

One couple very physically affectionate and off by themselves, ignoring group close to them - do they know the group or are they just close in physical proximity to them? Hugging from behind—girl on the outside hugging her boyfriend (assume it's boyfriend), no kissing just lots of hugging/touching—all appropriately though. Haven't noticed inappropriate (relatively speaking) touching of couples or other pairings in observations yet—punching, hugging, piggyback rides, etc. but nothing “R-rated”

13 kids out here, slow night for Swayze's

Guy taking money for tickets looks really bored and much older than the kids. Noticed this before several months ago—wonder if there's a huge disconnect between older gen. and emo kids? (Poss. Research topic)

Still haven't noticed a same-sex couple in my observations... I wonder if this is because they tend to be younger, or because they are more reserved and are not as physically affectionate, indicating couple status? Neal = good for research

Two guys talking confrontationally, wonder if there will be a fight?

No fight, just talking, shaking hands at end and walk back inside. Other people watched them but left them alone. Seemed tense but everything seems okay. Bouncer (?)/Ticket taker (?) – what would you call this guy?—was watching intently but didn't intrude. No yelling, just stern faces

Just noticed three more sets of parents dropping off kids

One parent stepped outside of car—daughter walked into Swayze's while mom went into food shop (seems pretty popular, good location) – watched her daughter as she walked in before going in. Wonder if she's planning on observing her kid and the others—do the emo kids' parents trust them (more or less than other parents?)? Do the emo kids have more communicative relationships with parents or just among one another? Remember: son from yesterday hugging dad. Could just be differentiated among diff. parents/teens, not necessarily specific to emo subculture

General moods of people here: happy to be with friends, joking

One kid wearing a shirt that says “\_\_\_\_\_Elementary School Field Day”—wonder if that kid got it from Goodwill (popular among emo youth to shop at these kinds of places) or from own collection?

Saturday, July 10<sup>th</sup>

First thing I notice when pull up—Two emo kids (one guy, one girl) dressed EXACTLY alike (seems planned) they are hanging out together with two other friends in circle—both wearing red The Academy Is... shirts and tight blue jeans with Converse sneakers on. Only difference in outfits: the girl's have black Sharpie (?) writing on them, hearts and stars. Girl also has star tattooed or drawn on wrist. Guy's Converse shoes are plain. Guy grabs girl's black baseball-type hat and puts it on his head, girl swipes it back quickly, friends ducking out of way so that they can take the hat from one another. Interesting how the emo subculture allows this—I don't think you'd see a football player and a cheerleader wearing the same exact outfit

Still more girls holding hands and guys shaking hands. Usually hand shakes seem to settle minor (perhaps even fake/acted out) disagreements—kind of like the fake punching; anyone watching can see it's not real—or are used as greetings but sometimes they seem random.

About 20 kids currently congregating outside in 4-5 diff. groups. Groups seem more fluid than they usually do and the kids are not staying in one place as long as I have seen previously

Band setting up—this band seems to be unnoticed by the kids and seems to be the same age of the kids.

# of kids with tattoos: 4 (must be an older crowd, at least 18+?)

# of kids with piercings: 7! Types of piercings: nostril, tongue (one indiv. stuck out tongue at another, two piercings side by side on tongue), piercings on chest and WRIST (surface piercings) –both girls with these types of surface piercings

Band members going in and out of Swayze's and to car

Two cars peel away fast from parking lot, tires making noises on the ground—kids actually seem annoyed by this (they do not return)

Loud popping sound—never figure out what that was

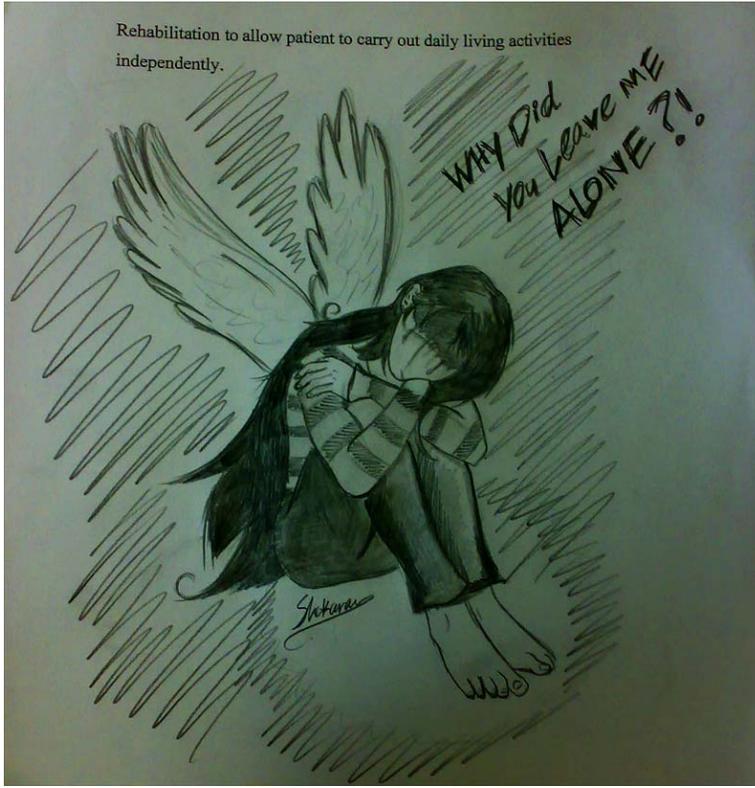
Two kids walking the sidewalk strip from store to store to venue... just walking, no walking into any of them

One group of kids NEVER goes inside Swayze's the entire time—wonder if they paid for tickets or if they are just here to see friends

Three kids walking—running really—from across the street to Swayze's—ACROSS BARRETT PARKWAY (dangerous!), coming from diff. shopping center? Holding Barnes and Noble bag

Two guys hugging one another, long hugs that last a while—part of big group (maybe 7-8 kids at this point consistently in group, inc. 3 girls)

Appendix



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B.



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