

Music, Youth Subculture and Self-Harm

- Music is central to youth culture.
- Music is believed to influence youth culture more than any other form of media.
- Young people use music to define and express their identity and to form values (Seelow, 1996).

“I began to appreciate music as...a place where I could be accepted, a place with no rules and no judgments.” Marilyn Manson.

- Young people’s specific subcultural identity is linked to specific musical styles, from heavy metal to hip-hop (Seelow, 1996).
- Preferences for particular styles of music have been implicated in higher incidences of suicide and self-harm, however there has been little empirical research examining this link.
- Parents of young people who have committed suicide have unsuccessfully attempted to sue music groups for influencing their adolescent’s death (Martin, 1998).
- Some musical subcultures thought to be linked to suicide and self-harm include: Country (Stack & Gundlach, 1992); Blues (Stack, 2000), Heavy Metal (Martin, Clarke, & Pearce, 1993; Scheel & Westefeld, 1999; Stack, Gundlach, & Reeves, 1994) (see summaries of research linking these types of music to suicide, below), and the more recent “Emo” (“Emotive Hardcore”) music (for which there is no current research evidence).
- Young people are drawn to certain styles of music because the music reflects their attitudes and moods, and therefore, perhaps some music *“nurtures suicidal tendencies already present in the subculture”* (Stack et al., 1994, p15).
- It is difficult to establish a causal link between music preference and suicide or self-harm; a) because of the difficulty controlling for the myriad of other risk factors associated with both suicidal behaviour and music preference (Scheel & Westefeld, 1999), b) studies are largely cross-sectional and exploratory, and c) it is difficult to measure quantitatively the prevalence of preference for specific styles of music.
- However, knowledge of music preference may be useful to identify at-risk young people. A number of cross-sectional studies have investigated these links.

Research Evidence – Music Preference and Self-Harm

A series of research articles in the 1990's suggest that there was a possible link between preference for heavy metal music and suicidal behaviours. Since the decline of interest in heavy metal in the late 1990's, there has been little research published about the effects of music preference on suicidal behaviour.

- Martin and colleagues (1993) found that more than 20% of high school aged Australian males and 62% of females preferring rock/heavy metal claimed to have engaged in deliberate self-harm in the previous 6 months, compared with 8% and 14% respectively for pop music. Those young people who listened to rock/heavy metal also had more suicidal thoughts than those who preferred pop music. Lester and Whipple (1996) also reported that those young people who liked heavy metal music had more often thought about suicide in the past.
- Scheel and Westefeld (1999) found that heavy metal fans had significantly lower scores on the Reasons for Living Inventory. Further, 74% of young American female heavy metal fans had either occasionally or seriously thought about killing themselves, compared to 35% of non-fans ($p < .004$). The result was less extreme for males, with 42% of heavy metal fans reporting occasionally or seriously thinking about suicide, and 15% of non-fans reporting occasionally or seriously thinking about suicide ($p < .10$). In addition, Scheel and Westefeld found significant positive correlations between preference for country music (which is often melancholy) and reasons for living.

Stack, Gundlach & Reeves (1994) suggested that *“the audience of heavy metal tends to be drawn from social groups at higher than average risk of suicide”*. These groups include; males, Caucasians, those of low socioeconomic status, and those people with disorganised family lives. Heavy metal music is marked by relatively high levels of alienation and despair. The authors analysed the relationship between heavy metal magazine subscriptions (which is likely to be a reliable measure of heavy metal subculture) and rates of youth suicide in the U.S. Results showed that the greater the extent of the heavy metal subculture, the greater the youth suicide rate, even when controlling for other independent variables including parental divorce, and economic strain. Indeed, those at greatest risk of disturbance and distress are not heavily concentrated amongst the most materially disadvantaged (Eckersley, 1993).

- Recently, Young and colleagues (2006) investigated the prevalence of deliberate self-harm and attempted suicide among the “Goth” youth subculture. “Goth” is described as “a subgenre of punk with a dark and sinister aesthetic, with aficionados conspicuous by their range of distinctive clothing and make-up and tastes in music” (p 1058). Only 15 of 1258 young people that they studied identified as being “goth”, however, identification with the goth subculture was strongly associated with lifetime prevalence of self-harm and suicide attempt. Compared with other subculture preferences, goth identification had the strongest association with self-harm. It was also the strongest predictor of both self-harm and suicide attempt after adjustment for other sociodemographic factors such as parental divorce, gender, depression and alcohol/drug use.

The heavy metal singer Marilyn Manson is a familiar face of the goth subculture. Manson often cuts himself with broken glass before his audiences and has nearly 500 scars covering his body as a result of ritualistically cutting himself with broken bottles. In his video *Dead to the World*, Marilyn Manson repeats the phrase, “***You might as well kill yourself, you’re already dead. You might as well kill yourself you’re already dead.***” Also, one Marilyn Manson song states:

I bash myself to sleep...

I scar myself you will see...

I throw a little fit

I slit my teenage wrist... (http://www.goodfight.org/e_mmanson.html)

- The relationship between Blues and Country Music and (all ages) suicide and suicide attitudes has also been investigated in two studies by Stack (2000) and Stack and Gundlach (1992). Stack and Gundlach (1992) found that the greater the airtime devoted to country music, the greater the (white) suicide rate (independent of divorce, living in a southern US State, poverty, and gun availability). Stack (2000) also proposed that the themes in blues music (e.g. “love gone bad”) might attract people who are suicidal and reinforce their suicidal moods and attitudes. However, he found that blues fans were not significantly different from non-fans in their level of suicide acceptance after controlling for religiosity, church attendance, political liberalism and education.
- Stack (2000) suggests that music may have a positive, cathartic effect for some people – i.e. listening to music *decreases* depressed or suicidal moods. For example, Martin and colleagues (1993) reported that heavy metal fans experienced positive shifts in mood after listening to heavy metal music. However, those young people who reported feeling worse after listening to heavy metal music were found to be the most severely disturbed on a number of their measures, including suicidal thoughts, self-harm and depression. Scheel and Westefeld (1999) examined this issue more closely and found that only a small proportion of their sample (1%) reported feeling sad *after* listening to their preferred music, regardless of the type of music they listened to. Eckersley (1993) suggests that Western culture has failed to provide a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose for young people. It is possible, then, that belonging to a strong subculture, a place where a young person can feel accepted, gives them back those values that society has failed to provide.

Being “Emo”

What is “Emo”?

The term “emo” (short for “emotional”) is a relatively new term used to describe a person (usually a young person) who is unhappy, lonely or depressed, as in *‘I’m so emo’*. Emo is also a slang expression for a range of fashion styles and attitudes (anti society, pro emotional suffering and pro self-harm) of fans of the commercial forms of “emo” music, who often describe themselves as being emo.



Emo music arose out of the hardcore punk movement of the early 1980’s, and had only an underground following until the late 1990’s, the music was independent from mainstream and only had a relatively small number of listeners. The “emo” subculture emerged following the mainstream commercial success of bands such as Taking Back Sunday and Dashboard Confessional.

Since then, emo music (whether wrongly or not) has been linked to promoting cutting and self-mutilation, due to its “deep diary-like outpourings of emotion”. For example, Taking Back Sunday, a successful mainstream “emo” band, portray cutting on one of their album covers and have produced a song entitled “Cute without the E”. Dashboard Confessional also make allusions to cutting in their song “If You Can't Leave It Be, Might As Well Make It Bleed”.

Before emo was recently brought to our attention in the context of CYF, we were quite unaware of its existence as a youth subculture. It was surprising then, that an incidental change to a “mainstream” youth-marketed radio station one evening, revealed a conversation between two DJ’s regarding the emo fashion style of a colleague. This suggests that there is a distinctive emo youth subculture within New Zealand society.

Causal Explanations of Psychosocial Disorders in Young People

Music preference may be one of a myriad of aspects of 'youth culture' offered as explanations for the development of suicidal behaviours in young people, merely on the basis of observed associations between the two. More broadly, there has been much speculation, but few empirical studies, of the contribution of various sociocultural changes to the increase in suicidal behaviour and other psychosocial disorders (including substance abuse, depression, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, conduct disorder, criminal behaviours) in the last few decades. A substantial effort to address this question was made in Europe in the early 1990s: Rutter and Smith (1995) explored a range of explanations for the rise in psychosocial disorders in youth. They identified immense problems in testing hypotheses in this field. In summary, they provided ten major conclusions about the causes of psychosocial disorders (including suicidal behaviours) in young people:

1. As living conditions in societies have improved, levels of disorder have increased.
2. Conversely, increasing affluence, *per se*, does not account for the overall increase in psychosocial disorders.
3. Although unemployment creates *individual risk*, a high level of unemployment within a society does not explain rises in disorder.
4. Worsening physical health does not account for the increase in psychosocial disorders. As physical health improves, psychosocial disorders also become more frequent.
5. There is evidence to suggest that increasing levels of family discord and lack of parental support and involvement have played a role in the rise in psychosocial disorders at both individual and community levels.
6. "...The changing pattern of transitions in adolescence and early adult life may cause risks associated, for example, with a growth of youth culture, a possible increasing isolation of adolescents from adults,...earlier engagement in sexual relationships,... increase(s) in psychosocial stressors, (and) an increase in peer group influence..."
7. Exposure to mass media does not largely account for the rise in psychosocial disorders. More likely, mass media reflects changing attitudes in society and thus, may augment the effects of social change.
8. Although changes in moral values *may* be connected with increases in psychosocial disorder, there is no research evidence to suggest that there is a causal link between moral decline and increasing psychosocial disorder.
9. Increased expectations to succeed, and the difficulties that young people experience in meeting these expectations may play a role in increased psychosocial disorders.
10. The evidence suggests that, to some extent, causal explanations are different for different disorders. For example, increased alcohol consumption is associated with increases in violent crime, and the increased availability and misuse of alcohol and other drugs has played a role in the rise of suicide and suicidal behaviour.

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