If There's Nothing Here Then It's Probably Yours: Selling "Emo" to the Rx Generation

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If There's Nothing Here Then It's Probably Yours:
Selling "Emo" to the Rxe Generation

John Bartholomew 04

They'll try you to be young
Like they wish they were.
'Cause they've been there; they know you
Can't give 'em a lie.
They'll try to take you who you are,
And they'll sell you to yourself.
-Polvo

The last few years have revealed an explosion in American mainstream awareness about two rather peculiar and apparently unrelated phenomena. The first and most disquieting trend rising to the top of the American consciousness is the fact that more adolescents are being diagnosed with depression, being placed upon anti-depressants, and killing themselves than in previous decades. A plethora of studies, articles, and a hysterical mass-media trumpeting of doom states that we are now raising a generation of emotional zombie-teens who seem peculiarly obsessed with their studies articles, and a hysterical mass-media trumpeting of their own sadness, and whose parents are increasingly concerned most often with more personal issues, and often contains more type of music spawned from punk and hardcore that deals describe several Washington, D.C., musically dynamic compositions than the straight-ahead from catchy pop-punk bands singing about broken hearts to cent depression and medication, the term emo has grown in uniquely concurrent with the spate of articles regarding adolescent phenomena. The first and most important temporal changes in the rates of major depression, the term emo is known to several Washington, D.C., bands that existed during the mid to late-80s, among them Rites of Spring and Embrace (Sarig 255). As with all subjectively defined genres, emo quickly divided and soon was used to refer to everything from pop-punk bands singing about broken hearts to extremely inaccessible and obscure groups that included as essential components of their sound extreme loud-sdf dynamics, throat-shredding screaming, and compositions of often several minutes long. Over the last few years, interestingly concurrent with the spate of articles regarding adolescent depression and medication, the term emo has grown in popularity and the bands it has been applied to have increased their viability as a commercial music form. In its current form, emo is widely seen in popular culture as punk-influence music with lyrics about being really sad or really angry, but in a sensitive way (Busch & Johnson 1). This is the

The New England Journal of Medicine offers a smaller but still valid estimate that "Depression is present in about...% of adolescents at any given time" (667).

The number of prescriptions of anti-depressants has likewise increased, lending itself to the popularization of the term "Generation Rx." Oh, those pundits. Time, in its Nov ember 3rd, 2003, cover story entitled "Medicating Young Minds," stated, "some people have justifiably begun to ask, Are we raising Generation Rx?" (48). The article reveals that, "According to a study by Professor Julie Zito of the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, use of anti-depressants among children and teens increased threefold between 1987 and 1996. And that use continues to climb" (49). In an article on Salon.com which also uses the term "Gen Rx," Jenn Shreve states, "According to a pharmacist at a large university that asked his name and affiliation not to be used, antidepressants top the list of drugs prescribed to college students, next to oral contraception, antibiotics, and allergy medication" (2-3). An article by Rob Waters entitled "Generation Rx" states that, "According to IMS Health, a research firm that tracks prescription drug sales, nearly 2.98 million prescriptions for anti-depressants were written for children and adolescents in 1999 — more than 11,000 new prescriptions for children every weekday" (2). In "Generation Rx" (notice a trend here?) by Amy Blyom, which appeared in the March 12, 2000, issue of the New York Times Magazine, Bloom estimates that, "2.5 million [children] are on antidepressants" (24). Adolescents suicide statistics corroborate the assumption that teen depression is actually an increase in rates of suicide. The Centers for Disease Control report that suicide is the third leading cause of death for people aged fifteen to twenty-four. The American Journal of Public Health article, "Trends in Adolescent Suicide: Misclassification Bias?" backs up these findings, stating that, "Reports on suicide rates in the United States show a dramatic increase in rates for teenagers and young adults between 1950 and 1990... This escalation is especially significant given the overall decrease in adolescent mortality since 1968, mainly due to reductions in adolescent death (1). Adolescent Depression and Suicide by Dr. John and Lois Woodruff (1991) states that, Catherine Dalmer finds the increase, "among persons aged 10 to 14 years by 109% between 1980 and 1997" (3). Besides the massive amount of statistical data suggesting an increase in teen depression or at least an in crease in awareness, along with data concluding that adolescent anti-depressant prescriptions and suicides are up, numerous other events lend the impression of an increasing cohort of depressed youth. Elizabeth Wurtzel is an example of one of many youthful writers publicizing depression in young people. In her book, Prozac Nation, she states, "it seemed like this was one big Prozac Nation, one big mess of malaise" (297). She continues by postulating that, "It almost seemed as if, perhaps, the next time half a million people gather for a protest march on the White House green it will not be for abortion rights or gay liberation, but because we’re all so bummed out" (298). The film version of Prozac Nation is slated for release next year. Numerous white, middle class school shooters in the late 90s were on anti-depressants as well, and the media frenzy and subsequent jocks versus nerds features that issued forth from the loins of these stories further projected an image of a large, distressed, and sad segment of the young population.

Thus the niche market was established. Huge amounts of publicity over adolescent depression, suicide, and medication, with figures in the millions, allowed for the creation of a population that obviously needed some marketing to fill the gaping void in their lives. When awareness of emo began bubbling up into the upper reaches of media consciousness, the idea of what to market became more crystallized. Beginning in 2001 and moving into today, emo has exploded into the mainstream consciousness, with numerous features in Rolling Stone, Spin, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Seventeen, and other massively mainstream publications. In virtually every mainstream publication that did a feature on emo, the emphasis of the piece was clearly upon the emotional pain of both the musical acts and the listeners, along with the expanding commercial possibilities granted by the opening of a new market. Obviously sad boys buy stuff too. Time published the piece "Emotional Rescue" in its May 27th, 2002, issue, and conveniently sorted teenagers into demographics for the brain-dead suits at record companies. The authors, Tyrangiel, declared (in a very professional, bulleted list, no less) that, "Sensitive Kids love emo: Adolescents can be divided up into two categories: those who pretend to feel nothing and those who aspire to feel everything. The latter makes up the emo faithful, like Red Sox fans, are only happy when they're sad (60). Tyrangiel also helped lay out a basic blueprint for any record companies seeking to snap up an emo act by sagely asserting that, "Emo is the antipod. It shuns abstraction to drive home a single point: woe is me" (60). The article's...
emphasizes upon feelings of sadness and self-obsession, hallmark marks of depression is obvious, and the division of kids into those who have too many feelings is as disturbing as it is untrue. However, given the media carnival tent erected on the prone bodies of Zoloft-popping sensitive white kids, the categorization is ultimately supervening in Rolling Stone’s July 25th, 2002, feature on Dashboard Confessional’s Chris Carrabba entitled “King of Pain” that, “the emo tag helped Dashboard Confessional catch with a growing under- ground of like-minded young fans who want more emotional depth and complexity from their music than the machine- tured sound of teen pop or hip-hop can provide.” (39). The New York Times jumped in to assist record companies in de- fining who want emo in its idiotically titled article, “Como [as in Commotion] Over Emo [as in Emotion].” Kelsea Sannen writes, “For kids who take their music (and themselves) more seriously, there’s a punk subgenre called emo, which is a bit slower and a lot more funny” (E3). Again there is the implication that emo is for the “serious” kids; the ones inclined to self-reflection, which often manifests itself to an unhealthy degree in depression. However, most of the other early articles on emo, “Como over Emo” eventually (and justifiably) poked fun at the rather mediocre and formulaic bands breaking into the mainstream. Sannen relates that, “it’s hard to figure out why the [band The Get Up Kids] inspires such passion. Matthew Pryor isn’t a very distinctive singer and his lyrics are nothing special…” (E3) She summarizes the article by making a statement about seminal independent rock band Superchunk, who opened for The Get Up Kids at the concert she reviewed, when she writes, “Nevertheless it was a relief to be reminded of all the adventurous music that exists beyond the narrow confines of emo” (E3). As exemplified by the Time and New York Times quote above, a rather disdainful approach was taken towards the beards of mediocrity being emitted from the underground. That is, until albums started selling 500,000 copies with no major label support or videos, like Dashboard Confessional’s “The Places You Have Come To Fear The Most” (Gordon 62). The independent music scene is often fashion-con- scious, which is embraced or spat upon to varying degrees, as evidenced by Orchid’s “Aesthetic Dialectic:”. This should mean more but it can’t. So dance, dance, dance.

To the sounds of America’s best dressed fake outfit.

Since current culture seems to accept the notion that consumption cure anomie, along with the sales boom of actual records, more and more publications began focusing on the fashion sense and products involved with emo. The impetus to succd as many kids as possible into wanting a semi-semi-uniform must be too much to resist. The Honolulu Advertiser noted that, “There’s a new style emerging in Hawaii high schools and colleges... It’s underground, independent, and elite, they say. It’s called “emo” — and, like most youth fashion movements, it’s an outgrowth of a musical style” (1). They even detailed the style by stating that, Emo is a look a mother could love. Wholesome, clean-cut and, well, almost nerdy. These folks shop at The Gap, Diesel, and second-hand or thrift stores. They like Starbucks or high-top sneakers, and Adidas Sambas. Emo combines a wide range of clothes into a visually appealing and coherent look, with a focus on comfort and individuality. It features a combination of rock-centric and hip-hop elements, with a strong emphasis on emotion and expression. The style is often characterized by a mix of casual and edgy clothing, including baggy jeans, hoodies, and tee-shirts. Emo is also known for its unique and creative hairstyles, with trends such as side-swept bangs, mohawks, and braids. Emo boys often wear baseball caps or beanies, and girls often wear headbands or bangs. The music associated with Emo is typically characterized by its emotional lyrics, with a focus on themes such as heartbreak, isolation, and existential angst. Emo artists often draw inspiration from a wide range of musical styles, including punk, indie rock, and post-punk. Emo has had a significant influence on the music industry, with many Emo bands achieving commercial success. The style has also had a lasting impact on fashion and culture, with many Emo-influenced trends becoming mainstream over time.
wear “Converse or Vans” for shoes, along with a plethora of other brand names conveniently side-barred: Lucky Brand jeans, Jansport backpacks, CK jeans, a Sony Discman, Doc Martens, and so on (176). It is eerily reminiscent of a decade prior, when fashion magnates declared grunge to be the new “it” style and tried incorporating flannel into three hundred dollar skirts. In both cases, the supposed articulated angst of a generation has been eventually packaged and sold as a clothing line. Since the genre was born from a non-commercial aesthetic, this appropriating of the music, history, and style has of course been met with resistance, expressed in Sunny Day Real Estate’s “The Shark’s Own Private Fuck”.

Believing the fear that drives your greed When you discover the empty place A hollow world of instant pleasures The way you were so disturbed What’s your worth? What is it you heard? Try to smile as we devour your youth.

Resistance, however, is past futile, until the next pop culture trend with marketplace potential comes along.

The burgeoning popularity of “emo” both as a popular music genre and as a fashion-based lifestyle is undeniable given its proliferation in the past few years. Similarly undeniable is the preponderance of evidence suggesting a rise in adolescent depression and asserting an increase in adolescent suicide and anti-depressant use. The coinciding time frames of increased mainstream perception of these trends would not suggest a correlation if it were not for the constant, unabashed advertising of “emo” as music for the emotionally downtrodden or authenticity obsessed. A barrage of articles, features, and reviews all triumphantly declare that the next big thing in rock had arrived, and that it was for kids that were “real” and “deep” and, yes, “depressed.” The self-obsession of most of the music and its focus on the darker side of life, like not getting a date to the prom or - said more bluntly - not getting a date at all, becomes as stylized as the trend. With billions of dollars spent on the retailization process of the genre practically encouraging millions of adolescents and teen suicide, it is only natural that some of the less savory members of the media and record industry would swoop down to see if their were any survivors they could sell their own limbs back to.

Works Cited
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