

**The Ghost of “Emo:” Searching for Mental Health Themes  
in a Popular Music Format**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of “Emo” has gained attention among counselors who work with teens in school settings. Emo has been associated with music and popular media has linked it to mental health concerns, but scholarly sources have not converged regarding what sort of music it is, or what it means for adolescents’ wellness. The authors devise and explain a procedure for identifying and analyzing music with Emo characteristics. Several songs were identified having lyrics or video imagery that portrayed mental health scenarios, sufficient to trigger counselors’ duty-to-warn and/or mandated reporting obligations. Recommendations are made for the practice of school counselors.

*Keywords:* adolescence, counseling, self-harm, music preference

## **The Ghost of “Emo:” Searching for Mental Health Themes in a Popular Music Format**

How do school counselors recognize when a cultural trend that impacts students' wellness is noteworthy beyond mere fad? The term “zeitgeist” is attributed to the philosopher Hegel, who believed that shifting moods and attitudes are what direct peoples' actions throughout history, as if time itself (*zeit*) was moved by *geist*, a spirit or ghost (Baille, 1910). The importance of social change is easiest to identify in retrospect, yet we (the first author and a colleague) had no clear answer a few years ago when another colleague asked, “What is this ‘Emo’ that the kids talk about?” A first reaction was that Emo is associated with music, possibly an introspective form of “protest” music, but the journal literature includes few mentions of *Emo*.

Whatever Emo is, the phenomenon is not local: At a recent annual conference of the American Counseling Association, a session presented by the first author, titled “Finding Emo,” drew over 200 attendees, who described themselves as counselors working in a variety of school and other practice settings. Many counselors asked not only, “What is Emo,” but also, do youth who identify with Emo culture and music have specific counseling needs, or are they at-risk for mental health problems? Specifically, are they at greater risk for suicide or self-injury? Without a scholarly view of Emo, definitions default to the vernacular. A blog post on a popular web site quipped that “Emos hate themselves. Goths hate everyone. Emos want to kill themselves. Goths want to kill everyone” (Lewis, 2006). This sobering “definition” of Emo vis-à-vis its presumed analogue, Goth, suggests both concern and stereotype in popular culture

regarding the link between subgroup membership or music preference, and mental health/suicide risk.

School counselors have a role in addressing the mental health needs of students (ASCA, 2009) and an ethical duty to protect students who are likely to self-harm, if necessary by breaking confidentiality (Hays, Craigen, Knight, Healey, & Sikes, 2009). However, counselors do so carefully, typically first weighing the specificity of a suicide threat and the presence of written guidelines (Isaacs & Stone, 1999; Moyer & Sullivan, 2008; Sullivan & Moyer, 2008). School counselors can become effective coordinators of interventions to address student mental health concerns, including depression and self-injury, with or without suicide attempts (Dykes, Specian, Nelson, & Gray, 2006; Wright & Emmert-Aronson, 2008). School counselors are aware of the linkage between popular music messages and students' attitudes about interpersonal relationships (Glass, Curtis, & Thomas, 2005), and school counselors should monitor how fast-moving social change (e.g., related to technology, such as "sexting") which can have an impact on mental health (McEachern, McEachern-Ciattoni, & Martin, 2012). Although King and his colleagues (King, Price, Telljohann, & Wahl, 2000) found that school counselors could usually distinguish from among list of student variables those confirmed to be associated with suicide risk, vs. spurious "foils," some student characteristics were classified correctly only one-half the time. One reason why counselors may have little information about particular risk factors might be the behavior's relative obscurity; for example, Simpson, Armstrong, Couch, and Bore (2010) found that the social stigma of cutting (self-mutilation) deterred teens from coming forward. In the same way, lack of understanding regarding Emo may impede school counselors' from evaluating this

factor in context when assessing ambiguous self-harm risks. To better understand the nature of Emo and its messages to adolescent regarding mental health, the authors review literature defining Emo and trace its history, then describe a method for evaluating the contents of songs and videos that relate to mental health issues, and finally conclude with specific counseling techniques for working with youth who ascribe to 'Emo' culture and music.

### **A Brief History of “Emo”**

Music referred to as “Emo” (short for emotional) is believed to have descended from “hardcore” [rock], an offshoot of punk rock. Former music agent and concert promoter Blush (2001) interviewed musicians as key informants to compile a oral history of hardcore bands, calling them “born of a doomed ideal of middle-class utopia,” their fans identified by “a threatening demeanor, and a hatred of the mainstream... What set these kids apart from jocks and rednecks was a vague political consciousness and a vigilante-like do-gooder streak” (p.15). Greenwald (2003) described the origins of Emo as a shift occurring among hardcore bands in Washington, D.C., as they moved beyond an expression of anger at the community – “a thrown punch” – and focused on the individual’s experience of that anger. According to Greenwald, “The goal was no longer to shake your fist at the injustices of the world, it was to shake yourself, to push down.” (p. 11). “Emo-core” bands attracted a small loyal following, but remained “underground” (playing at small, local venues) and “indie” (independent, not financed by record studios or played on commercial radio).

In 1991, an alternative rock band, *Nirvana*, became the first underground band to achieve commercial success with top-ranked album sales and national concert tours, thus opening doors to other indie bands and bringing punk into the rock mainstream

(Azerrad, 2001). As conceptual descendants of Emo bands proliferated, others further questioned its definition. The singer for *My Chemical Romance*, the band most often mentioned in discussion of Emo, called it “garbage;” “we were never emo” (Sowerby, 2007). Another band often associated with Emo explained their rejection of the term: “It’s ignorant! The stereotype is guys that are weak and have failing relationships... if you listen to our songs, not one has that tone” (“Panic! At The Disco declare...,” 2006).

Musicians and fans may be inhibited from identifying as Emo due to the unflattering stereotypes portrayed in pop culture, such as the news media and mass entertainers. For example, comedian Carlos Mencia satirized Emo as a manifestation of spoiled rich children, in a sketch singing “*you get me all this stuff...*” (gestures arm at parents’ mansion and new sports car) “*but you don’t get meeeeeee*” (as he rides away on a moped). News outlets worldwide have treated Emo as a depressogenic influence causing suicidality in teens with no prior history of mental illness (e.g., Rawstone, 2008; As-Sulaimi, 2009). However, scholarly literature does not confirm this assertion, perhaps in part because teens may be reluctant to identify as Emo for research purposes (Phillipov, 2010).

### **Emo and Adolescent Mental Health**

In the wake of substantial media publicity following three Australian teens’ suicides, Baker and Bor (2008) reviewed the refereed literature pertaining to Emo and mental health risk in adolescents, and Scott and Chur-Hansen (2008) described qualitatively Emo teens’ use of text messages. The latter focused on interpersonal networks of Emo teens and was the only study located in journal databases which involved human subjects. Baker and Bor (2008) found the closest analogue to understanding Emo and mental health risk was an earlier wave of suicide risk studies

that had been set off by a similar watershed moment, that is, a series of high-profile suicides in the US during the 1980s. A number of scholarly papers regarding Goth identity also were published in the mid-2000s, following the Columbine High School massacre (and initial reports by the news media that the shooters were “Goths”). These few studies may inform how teens’ formation of subgroup identity (e.g., Goth, Emo) also may impact mental health concerns, and specifically self-injurious behaviors and suicide risk. In the section that follows, we subsume the findings and limitations of previous studies regarding music, subgroup identity, and mental health outcomes.

**Analogue 1: Heavy metal.** The early 1980s saw much concern over the influence of rock musicians on youth generally, and public debate reached a fever pitch after 1984, when a teen completed suicide while listening to Ozzy Osborne’s song “Suicide Solution” (even though the song’s lyrics were about addiction, explicitly stating that alcoholism is a form of suicide). Brown (2012), a music historian, argued that by then the United States was already falling into a “moral panic,” which culminated in a U.S. Senate committee hearing testimony that rock musicians had been encouraging suicide, as well as civil prosecution of heavy metal bands. In response, a number of scientific studies were published in the early 1990s investigating the connections between heavy metal and adolescent development. In response to a series of teen suicides in Australia, Baker and Bor (2008) revisited these studies and summarized their findings and limitations in the areas of personality, attitudes, mental health, and suicide. Though extensive, this body of literature may offer little of use to school counselors, due to pervasive inconsistencies and small effect sizes: Although heavy metal fans were found to have some differences in personality styles (Lester & Whipple,

1996; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003), the associations between heavy metal and suicide tended to become weak or non-significant when controlling for other predictors (Lacourse, Claes, & Villeneuve, 2001; Rustad, Small, Jobes, Safer, & Peterson, 2003; Stack, Gundlach, & Reeves, 1994; Stack, 1998). Thus, the wave of scientific inquiry originating after a series of highly-publicized teen suicides in the 1980s had lost momentum by 2005, when public concern regarding a new rash of suicides prompted such academic responses as Baker & Bor (2008), Martin (2006), and Scott and Chur-Hansen (2008).

**Analogue 2: Goth.** After the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, twin waves of paperback books and scholarly papers described the Goth phenomenon qualitatively. Unlike the earlier heavy metal studies, which benefitted from an identifiable fan base (Stack, Gundlach, and Reeves, 1994, used geographical rates of heavy metal fan magazine subscriptions to assess the population proportion of fans as a predictor of suicide rates), Goth was considered a subcultural group, and participants were not easily identified. Rutledge, Rimer, and Scott (2008) emphasized the role of school counselors, nurses, and teachers who work with parents and students to address the underlying mental health issues of teens, because “[Goth culture] tends to draw teens who are depressed, participate in self-harm activities, have family or social problems, and experience feelings of hopelessness” (p. 461). However, relatively few articles presented Goth within the context of human-subjects research or secondary data analysis (apart from news media reports of Goth murder-suicides). The most influential source has been sociologist Hodkinson’s (2002) self-described “insider” ethnography of Goth culture, cited by 222 subsequent papers. An insider perspective of youth

subcultures can be unique but “non-absolute,” and has specific limitations (Hodkinson, 2005).

Lack of a definition of group identity also has been an obstacle to quantitative research. In Young, Sweeting, and West’s 2006 study of 1,258 Scottish 19 year-olds participants were asked whether they identified with the “Goth” subculture. Of the 15 participants who “heavily” identified as Goth, 7 reported a prior suicide attempt. Although the study is called longitudinal, Young et al. acknowledged that some of those attempts pre-dated the participant becoming “Goth.” Criticisms of the article also included the small number of Goth-identified participants, and lack of generalizability to populations outside the Glasgow area (Taubert & Kandasamy, 2006). Although efforts were made to control for other predictor variables, Young et al. (2006) did not formalize their definition of “Goth;” instead, participants were asked to self-identify on a four-point scale, with the highest identification level (i.e., heavily) representing 1% of the sample. However, scores were entered into the logistic regression categorically (i.e., where Goth level 4 does not represent a different “amount” of Goth-ness than level 3, but rather a different group of people). Without the benefit of previous research to define Goth reliably, or estimates of population proportions, it is difficult to know at what level of measurement the Goth identity variable should be treated. Likewise, a five-level alcohol use question also was entered categorically, and none of the high-frequency levels (including “every day”) were significant predictors of suicide. This is inconsistent with the literature on suicide prevention (e.g., Sher, 2006). Though the results of this study should be viewed within the context of these limitations, the rate of drug use reported by the participants most strongly identifying as Goth (87%) and participants disclosing a

previous suicide attempt (78%) was higher than the overall sample (56%). Goth-identifying participants reported suicide attempts at a higher rate than the overall sample, but it is unclear why the Goth identity variable was so strongly correlated with other predictors.

**Synthesis of analogue studies.** Others have been tentative in establishing the link between Goth, Emo, and suicide. Martin (2006) described the rise of public concern about Emo in Australia after several apparent “copycat” suicides of Emo youth, yet the relative role of Emo identity in suicide remains unknown in comparison to significant protective factors that are complex and relational, such as teens’ feelings of connectedness to family and school (McNeely & Falsi, 2009; Resnick et al., 1997). Martin (a psychiatrist) also wondered if studies of Goth were suitable analogues, noting that Emo youth seem to react angrily when compared. Baker and Bor (2008) reflected on the reasons that previous studies finding an association between music preferences and mental health had failed to demonstrate causality. Among their recommendations for future research: (a) A dose-response relationship between music and mental health should be verified; (b) the temporal sequence should be established that listening to music precedes changes in affect or actions, and (c) those changes in affect or actions should be classified as negative or positive. Investigating the temporal sequence and subsequent affect would help clarify whether music, in fact, indoctrinates adolescent listeners with pathological ideas, an assumption which Brown (2012) has commented seemingly characterized the 1980s. But some recent papers have taken entirely the opposite view; for example, Glass et al. (2005) in their study of general themes of adolescent music (i.e., “Top 40” songs, which have a much wider listener base),

considered that the lyrical “messages” actually are expressions by listeners, because the latter have endorsed the music via their purchasing power.

Matching the above examples of reluctance to accept a presumed linkage between group identity and suicidality, have been criticisms leveled against the very ethics of such research, as apparent youth advocates within the academic community stepped forward to question the utility and to speculate the harm of pathologizing Goth or Emo identity (e.g., Phillipov, 2006, 2010). Thus, a practical interpretation of research findings to date leaves counselors working in educational settings no confirmation about whether (or why) Goth or Emo subgroup identification would be an effective criterion for identifying adolescents at-risk, compared to such factors as alcohol and drug abuse. Furthermore, epidemiological data cannot be interpreted reliably without an understanding of causality in the context of scientific theory (Hernán, Clayton, & Keiding, 2011; Simpson, 1951); therefore, research into subcultural identity and suicide risk should focus on basic description of Emo group identity as a precursor to quantitative hypothesis testing.

### **Literary and Spiritual Perspective**

Among the voices sympathetic to Emo, Anastasi (2005) worked carefully to frame the music as literature, relating it specifically to biblical narratives. He argued that Emo allowed teens (specifically boys) to express feelings that otherwise were outside the plane of discourse, and this lyrical expression should create an opportunity to heal from life’s trials. Using the books of Job, Psalms, and Lamentations as a template for understanding growth through expression of grief, Anastasi reviewed a number of songs by quintessential Emo artists (e.g., Taking Back Sunday, Dashboard Confessional,

Sunny Day Real Estate, and All-American Rejects) and examined themes of romantic breakups and unrequited love. When songs protest the social world, Anastasi argued, they challenge the idea of omnipotent God, and this questioning is necessary for healing. However, while the bands studied are often cited in discussions of Emo, Anastasi offered no documentation why these songs are the most representative, or even whether grief plays the same role in healing after romantic breakups as within the biblical narrative (e.g., Job, which describes catastrophic destruction). Another limitation is the inability to articulate whether romantic breakups are a predictor or a moderator of suicidality.

In sum, the obstacles which complicate studies of Emo include (a) lack of definition for the Emo construct, or agreement who embodies it; (b) mixed findings in previous research on the linkage between music and mental health, (c) confusion whether Emo mental health aspects can appropriately be understood in the context of other subcultures or scholarly disciplines; and (d) uncertainty whether Emo influences, if harmful, are transmitted person-to-person via portable media or text messaging (e.g., Anastasi, 2005; Martin, 2006; Scott & Chur-Hansen, 2008), or if teens are first exposed to them through the environment or online (Rutledge et al., 2008).

### **Dissemination of Emo in Broadcast Media**

Published papers have speculated that teens were “predisposed” to adopt Goth identity in a way that interacted with pre-existing suicidality or mental health concerns (Rutledge et al., 2008; Young et al., 2006). Understanding the setting in which teens first hear Emo music may help clarify the reasons why some embrace it, and Baker and Bor (2008) noted the need for study of this context. If Emo musical identity is spread person-to-person, then helpers such as school counselors might identify students who

are connected to each other as possibly needing targeted services. If it is not spread person-to-person but rather pervasive in pop culture, then counselors might build on media literacy skills and use a narrative approach that focuses on clients' understandings of the world. These competing assumptions are typified by the dynamics of social (online) media and broadcast (over-the-air or online streaming) radio.

To study the changing role of online and social media, consultants Edison Research compared the results of stratified population surveys conducted in 2000 and 2010. While youth 12-24 in age increasingly use the Internet for listening to music, broadcast radio remains their most common avenue of hearing new music (Rosin, 2010); ratings pioneer Nielsen (NYSE: NLSN) recently replicated these findings (Gunderson, 2012). Commercial radio stations are organized into "formats," each defined by a repertoire of songs with historical acceptance, plus new songs with rising popularity. Baker and Bor (2008) asked whether teens listen to all songs within a genre, or prefer specific compositions; in commercial radio this distinction is investigated by such market analysts as Nielsen and Mediabase, which chart the popularity of new music on a weekly basis. In addition to consumer surveys and focus groups, these firms use sound-recognition technologies to monitor radio stations continuously and log the songs aired (which vary partly on the basis of listeners' call-in requests). Other firms specialize in analysis of Internet traffic to determine what songs are being streamed online, and where (Howe, 2003). In contrast to the participant-oriented culture of Emo-core bands playing Washington D.C. clubs, the commercial radio research and programming cycle is not fan-controlled or democratic, but it is a standardized process

that uses convergent analysis of multiple data sources for planning, implementation, consumer feedback, and self-evaluation. Even as online media gain prominence, broadcast radio remains teens' most common source of new music, and also is a widespread medium that may be more available to teens in rural areas where high-speed internet connectivity and access to "subculture" groups are limited. For this reason, study of commercial radio formats seemed the most reliable and generalizable way to search for Emo music, with the highest potential for external and ecological validity.

In order to address the questions about Emo and adolescent mental health, we developed a replicable procedure for identifying music that may contain Emo content and analyzed whether any of these songs have unambiguous mental health themes in an effort to offer implications for school counselors.

## **Finding Emo**

### **Format and Station Selection**

After reviewing the list of bands regarded as Emo by conventional wisdom (e.g., as identified by Anastasi, 2005), we found their songs which enjoyed commercial success over the last decade had been featured on one of Nielsen's Rock charts (either Alternative Rock or Mainstream Rock, which somewhat overlap, and roughly correspond with Mediabase's Active Rock and Modern Rock). Within a format, songs correlate at the level of listener preferences, so this would be the logical place to look for new Emo music. We selected a high-powered FM broadcast station in a Midwestern city, listed on Nielsen's Modern Rock chart and Mediabase's Active Rock chart. As documented by market analysts Arbitron (NYSE: ARB), the station had listeners in three

cities; by cross-referencing each metro area with US Census 2010 data, we estimated 3 million people (60% of the state population) lived within reception range. This helped confirm that station offerings were nationally representative, not local or idiosyncratic.

### **Song Lyric Sampling**

We listened to identify songs with mental health themes, which we operationalized as (a) the presence of suicide risk factors and absence of protective factors; (b) evidence of diagnostic criteria for mental illness, or (c) behaviors that would trigger a school counselors' ethical duty-to-warn or mandated reporting action. Using this criterion, a song about feeling heartbroken would not be considered direct evidence of mental health concerns, unless it included a suicide threat, which would activate counselors' ethical duties – while unpleasant, hurt feelings in themselves do not constitute an abnormal developmental trajectory. Songs praising pharmacological and/or sexual hedonism likewise would not be sampled; drug use and risk-taking are often considered to be maladaptive, but not always evidence of a mental disorder. We focused on songs which had been published on an Active Rock “Top 40” chart within the last 10 years. To broaden our understanding of dramatic themes, we also watched the publishers' official videos (where available) on YouTube.com, a source that permits viewing-on-demand.

### **Mental Health Themes in Song Lyrics**

Eight songs had themes of serious mental health concerns and/or duty-to-warn or mandated reporting events, including suicide ideation, suicide attempts and completed suicides; acute grief and bereavement; childhood sexual and physical abuse; post-traumatic stress; and depression or dissociative disorders. The songs also

depicted the role of high-exposure stressors in suicidal ideation (discovering a body, repeatedly experiencing bullying and assault). Baker and Bor (2008) called for investigation of the assumption that teens actually understand the messages and implications of songs, because they may simply be listening to the music. We found the mental health themes were unmistakably portrayed in the “official” videos (i.e., released by the publishers for free-of-charge viewing on YouTube, the most common way that teens routinely listen to music [Lardinois, 2012]). Over time this should lead to higher comprehension rates. A summary of each composition’s lyrical and videographic content is found in Table 1.

None of the recording artists matched the bands commonly identified with “Emo,” although some of the musicians dressed in stereotypically Emo fashion (dyed black hair, facial piercings, dark clothes). With the exception of videos that posted contact information for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, the songs did not seem to argue “for” or “against” the behaviors depicted. In the videos, teen or youth protagonists were cast in a non-judgmental light, while the portrayal of adult characters ranged from good to evil, from competent to inept. The videos lacked the exaggerated emotionalism thought to be associated with Emo, yet the situations depicted were urgent. Because it is unknown whether these serious themes are truly “Emo,” accepting the assumption that Emo is an overly emotional style seems troubling: In the context of these traumatic events, how might a detached presentation prove more appropriate?

### **Social Context of Music Listening**

Published literature has suggested that underlying mental health factors might draw teens to specific music or a subgroup identity (Young et al., 2006), but popular media have speculated that teens within a subgroup influence each other to commit

acts of self-harm (Brown, 2012). Baker and Bor (2008) recommended that future research should clarify the social context in which teens listen to music. If Emo music is communicated in a social setting by physically exchanging CD-ROMs, as Anastasi (2005) and Glass et al. (2005) suggested, then peer influence may have a causal role in changing tastes and attitudes. However, peer influence may not be necessary for exposure to Emo, because broadcast radio makes a standardized music experience widely available. Also, it seems unlikely that teens would listen to Emo music solely because of peer pressure, because Rock genres in general are not very popular (Rosin, 2010). Edison Research found that from 2000 to 2010, listener share for teens (cohort ages 12-24) and adults (cohort ages 22-34) remained nearly equal between groups, and changed at the same rate within-groups (Rosin, 2010); these findings are not longitudinal, but also are not predicted by the hypothesis that maturation alone explains changing preferences. Thus, it is possible Emo teens' musical tastes could develop in a vacuum and persist. If these students, upon meeting for the first time, discovered much in common and developed cohesion quickly, a school principal might see it as a sudden emergence of Emo "clusters," triggering alarm as administrators and counselors press to determine if students' abrupt change in presentation reveals danger to self or others.

The eight songs we reviewed are only a sampling; a longitudinal approach would be more effective for clarifying whether Emo preference reflects or causes suicidality, or interacts with other factors. Future research should begin with qualitative description to identify the Emo construct reliably, and quantitative models of Emo mental health risk should control for other known predictors to differentiate between main effects, interaction effects, and confounding variables. For example, the videos in Table 1

depicted emotional distress as a result of prolonged bullying, childhood sexual abuse, and witnessing suicide; all of these have been associated in the literature with suicide risk (Kim & Leventhal, 2008; Molnar, Berkman & Buka, 2001; Gould, Jamieson & Romer, 2003), and should be measured using only valid instrumentation in future studies of Emo. Absent such research, it appears that music preference reflects the immediate thoughts of listeners seeking out specific songs to explore a theme, rather than listen indiscriminately as discussed by Baker & Bor (2008). We found this evidenced by YouTube's presentation of "suggested" lists of similar videos: For example, Song #1 and #2 concerned suicide and had links to each other, a connection called "collaborative filtering" which is based on statistical analysis of viewer preferences (Zhou, Wilkinson, Schreiber & Pan, 2008).

### **Recommendations for School Counselors**

Counselors can listen for cues that reveal when teens may identify with songs because they find comfort in thinking someone else has experienced the same pains (Anastasi, 2005). In our experience, we have found that students who experience the world through music often do not hesitate to describe it as their lens for viewing the world. School counselors have found music lyrics a useful tool which, when introduced into a group counseling setting, can help the counselors focus and explore topics of interest (Bruneau & Protivnak, 2012; Veach & Gladding, 2006). However, we urge caution for several reasons, beginning with the observation that rock music does not have universal appeal (Rosin, 2010). Moreover, the songs' themes are alienated and confrontational. Song #1 questions whether an authority figure can ever possess both expectation and empathy: "I will never be/What you want me to [s.i.c.].../ You will never see/What's inside of me." Song #7 elaborates on the tension of parents' and educators'

expectations: "...everything that you thought I would be/Has fallen apart right in front of you." If these lyrics reflect a suspicion of that educators' hopes for students are controlling rather than altruistic, there is a risk that music-based counseling could be interpreted as an attempt to manipulate emotions, of the sort hinted by Song #1: "You kept feeding me your bullshit/Hoping I would break."

Therefore, it is vital that the school counselor closely monitor the counseling relationship. This might best be accomplished in an individual setting, where the counselor can shift to the non-expert role when discussing music, and open-endedly elicit the student's understanding of the lyrics: "What does this mean to you? Is there a lyric or a phrase that seems to sum up the situation as you see it? Who is 'speaking,' and to whom? Does the song have a video, and if so what does it show?" The school counselor can help the student explore the meaning of the song, how it connects to the student's life, and to other songs (Bruneau & Protivnak, 2012), asking "of whom, or what, do the characters in the video remind you? Does this song relate to a time in your life? Is it past, present, or future?" The artistic meanings of the Table 1 videos were very clear, but students' personal understandings of most songs will be less conclusive, and it is important to explore their meaning. Finally, keep in mind that the metaphor of music does not appeal to all students, and by all accounts Emo students are a small population, so it is important to allow students to select themselves for this kind of interview.

**Discovery and reporting.** The songs listed in Table 1 contained some amount of verisimilitude in depicting phenomena of heightened concern to school counselors (e.g., cyberbullying and "sexting"). Accordingly, a song of particular interest to a student

may represent a real-world situation, perhaps one which has not been told to a school official and which may trigger the counselor's duty-to-warn or mandated reporting actions. To this end, school counselors who work with Emo students will benefit from giving all students a brief description of informed consent and limitations of confidentiality. Giving such a statement only to some students conveys the message they are seen as having a pathology of risk factors, which erodes the sense of individual dignity, while not giving it at all risks fostering a sense of betrayal if mandate reporting were to become necessary.

**Traumatic stressors.** Some of the video imagery was disturbing, with portrayals of suicide depicting vomit, blood, disfigurement, and grieving of family members. A potential for vicarious trauma might exist, particularly among clients bereaved by the completed suicide of a loved one or other stressful event. School counselors have a role in school-based crisis management (ASCA, 2007) and can prepare by seeking training in evidence-based approaches. For example, the Psychological First Aid (PFA) model, developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Center for PTSD, assumes that people are resilient and draw on strengths (Brymer et al., 2006, p. 5). By recognizing that the majority of children and adults who experience a trauma will not develop PTSD, school counselors can learn to work effectively and briefly to support the needs of most students who have experienced crisis, and distinguish those cases when a student can be helped by a referral to more specialized services.

**The counseling relationship.** Counselors can appreciate the potential for countertransference in the counseling relationship as illustrated through the portrayal of authority figures in the songs. While the notion of "teenage rebellion" is cliché, the

videos did not actually depict the rejection of authority for its own sake, but rather passed judgment on authority figures according to their success at protecting the child. In one video, a child is abused by a friend of her loving but oblivious parents, whose eyes are taped shut. In another video, a teen posts a suicide note online and is about to swallow pills when her mother bursts in, smartphone in hand. Adults who have good intuition (and who can keep pace with social and technological change) are more able to advocate successfully for children and teens, but will ultimately be judged according to their actions, not their intentions.

School counselors can promote trust with students by helping them understand the counselors' role and actions. One strategy is to model clear and transparent communication, for example by making available to the student any written notes, plans or data that appropriately should be possessed by the student. Called the "after-visit summary" in primary medical care (Solberg et al., 2006), this model benefits helpers as well as clients, by maximizing the efficiency of contact time, clarifying instructions for follow-up, and delineating the responsibility of each party. Counselors can build on this base by then reflecting on the fidelity of their own promises (Cottone & Claus, 2000; Forester-Miller & Davis, 1995; Kitchener, 1984). Working with an adolescent, the counselor might reflect and ask: "Here are my notes... Last time we met, we talked about... What else do you recall about our conversation? Before we met again, I agreed to do... And you agreed to do... Have I done this?" It is not required of counselors that every goal be reached and every promise kept, but it is expected that counselors should acknowledge and address the student's perspective.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

The sampling of songs contained unambiguous portrayals of real mental health concerns, however the precise nature of Emo remains unclear, as do the mechanisms by which Emo youth embrace or are influenced by music. Should educators be concerned (e.g., as described by Brown, 2012) that teens are corrupted by songs which glorify and promote self-harm? Or, as Baker and Bor have suggested (2008), do teens find the music a safe haven in which to identify and come to terms with conflicted feelings? At the time of this writing, Scott and Chur-Hansen's qualitative study (2008) stands out as the only to have involved human subjects. Without future research including rigorous description of the population, no basis exists even to claim that Emo youth have unique values, norms, and beliefs as would a cultural or subculture group. Still, the advice of Vontress, Johnson and Epp (1999) regarding cross-cultural counseling seems applicable here, as clients "see and understand only the helper there with them -- the other human being -- who cannot substitute technique for true caring because phoniness, superficiality, and indifference are recognized by members of every human culture" (p. 56). This concern of being treated with dignity and genuineness seems echoed through the lyrics of song #8, which warn "While you're outside looking in/ Describing what you see/ Remember what you're looking at is me."

School counselors may be effective working with Emo teens by tapping their disposition to explain their worldview and internal state through the metaphor of music (if inclined), but only when the counselors' words and actions are matched, and communicate respect for the student. Perhaps the lasting insight is that no student is the sum of their perceived risk factors; no person can be reduced to the stereotype that

others hold. The imagery and themes found in modern music address some of the same issues that concern school counselors, but from a different frame of reference. By acknowledging musical themes, counselors may gain insight of students' thoughts (as proposed by Glass et al., 2005) and thus better engage with them. But if students' dark jeans and dyed black hair are seen by educators as risk factors, teens will simply discard them for some new garb; their concerns will not change. Until these can be described and addressed, the "ghost of Emo" might be lurking anywhere at all.

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**Table 1***Tentative Lyrical and Videographic Evidence*

Song Topic(s)	Lyrical Exposition	Visual Exposition
<b>Song 1: <i>Coming Down</i> (recording artist: Five Finger Death Punch, © 2012)</b>		
Suicide, bullying	Step away from the ledge/ I'm coming down/ [...]/ Does anyone care at all?	Two teen protagonists: A young woman is bullied online, and a young man is assaulted by other teens. She swallows pills, and he shoots himself using a handgun. In a second ending, they are saved by an arriving friend or parent. Video ends showing contact telephone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.
<b>Song 2: <i>Inside the Fire</i> (recording artist: Disturbed, © 2008)</b>		
Grief; suicide contagion	Spoken introduction by singer David  Draiman: "The video you are about to see  contains a very sensitive subject, suicide..."	A woman in her 20s hangs herself from a ceiling rafter. Her male companion returns home and discovers her. Eventually, he puts a shotgun in his mouth, and wakes later in a padded cell.) Video ends by displaying NSPL hotline number.
<b>Song 3: <i>Never Too Late</i> (recording artist: Three Days Grace, © 2007)</b>		
Sexual abuse, post-traumatic stress	Even if I say/ It'll be all right/ Still I hear you say/You want to end your life	A little girl sits on the knee of a smiling male adult. Nearby, her parents' eyes are taped shut. Later, the child's dress is shown stained by dark hand prints; the abuser's hands are covered in ink. In the next scene, the child is transformed to an adult woman in a hospital ward. Nurses wrestle her to a bed and apply restraints.

Song Topic(s)	Lyrical Exposition	Visual Exposition
<b>Song 4: <i>Falling Away From Me</i> (recording artist: Korn, © 1999)</b>		
Family violence	I flirt with suicide/ Sometimes to kill the pain/ I can't always say/ It's going to be better tomorrow	In a large suburban home, a teenage girl sits in her bedroom listening to music. Her father bursts through the door, yelling, and beats her with a stick. The mother looks on, worried, but takes no action.
<b>Song 5: <i>Pain</i> (recording artist: Three Days Grace, © 2006)</b>		
Cutting, self- injury or risky behaviors	Pain/ I like it rough/ 'Cause I'd rather feel pain than nothing at all	A montage of images showing young people holding their bare arms extended, with raised (but uninjured) wrists.
<b>Song 6: <i>Rise Above This</i> (recording artist: Seether, © 2008)</b>		
Bereavement by suicide	Take the light/ And darken everything around it / For all we know/ This void will grow	A man in his 20's stands on the ledge of a tall building, and leans backward to fall. Elsewhere, his parents and siblings are knocked off their feet by some invisible force, and fall in the same pose as the protagonist. A family photograph reveals the singer as one of the siblings.
<b>Song 7: <i>Numb</i> (recording artist: Linkin Park, © 2003)</b>		
Depression, emptiness	I've become so numb/I can't feel you there/[...]All I want to do/Is be more like me, and be less like you	A teenage girl stands, expressionless, at various locations around her school or college. She remains statuesque as hundreds of other students pass by in accelerated motion.

Song Topic(s)	Lyrical Exposition	Visual Exposition
<b>Song 8: <i>Through Glass</i> (recording artist: Stone Sour, © 2006)</b>		
Alienation, dissociative mental illness	I'm looking at you through the glass/ Don't know how much time has passed/ Oh god it feels like forever/	Beautiful people mingle at an upscale Los Angeles party, while a photographer goes around snapping photos with a large flashbulb camera. After each picture, the subjects turn into lifelike cardboard props, which are folded up and carried away by stage hands, until everything has been packed away: Tables, chairs, the entire house and swimming pool, and a hilly background with giant billboard letters to resemble Hollywood but spoofed as "Hollowood."

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