

The Representation of Self Injury and Suicide on Emo Social Networking Groups

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Abstract

The influence of the media on suicide has become a growing topic of discussion in various academic fields. Little attention has however been paid to the influence of social media on teenage suicide. In this age of technological savoir-faire, teenagers are beginning to spend more and more time communicating via internet social networking sites. Recent news reports have blamed both social networking and the teenage emo subculture for romanticising suicide and encouraging and promoting suicidal behaviour online. In these uncensored and unrestricted online communities, destructive and dangerous conversations between vulnerable teenagers may go unnoticed. With this in mind, this baseline study aimed to determine the portrayal of suicide and self-harm on social networking sites by analysing the representation of these behaviours among emo teenagers on the popular social networking site Facebook. A content analysis of two emo groups revealed a glorification, normalisation and acceptance of suicidal behaviours and determined that the potential for social networking sites to be used as a tool for the promotion and encouragement of such behaviours exists. As such, with evidence now pointing towards a connection between teenage use of social media and the promotion of positive perceptions of suicidal behaviour, further research into the role of new forms of media in suicide contagion may need to be undertaken.

Keywords: *emo, social media, social networking, teenage suicide*

Introduction

Today's teens are impatient, overloaded with media and entertainment, techno savvy and street smart. Yet while they have the knowledge[,] they lack the awareness and maturity, and are emotionally naïve. Today's teenagers know a lot more than their parents in terms of technology but they have also accomplished something their parents' generation did not – they are killing themselves far more than any other generation.

(South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) 2009)

Suicide is not a modern phenomenon. People have been taking their own lives as far back as the ancient civilizations of Greece and Persia. This act of “self-murder” is growing at an alarming rate, with the World Health Organisation reporting an estimated one million suicides annually worldwide (2008:5). Although suicide is not specific to any particular gender, religion, economic sector or age group, the statistical findings on teenage suicides are particularly worrying, with suicide being recognised as the third leading cause of death among the youth (American Association of Suicidology (ASS) 2008:1)

In South Africa, suicide rates range from 11.5 per 100 000 to as high as 25 per 100 000 of the population, depending on sampling procedures and research methods, according to research by Schlebusch (2012). “About 11% of all non-natural deaths are suicide related. On average 9.5% of non-natural deaths in young people are due to suicide.” An article by South African psychologist, Judith Ancer (2011) notes that “social and cultural factors such as videos, chat rooms and songs about self-harm on YouTube, MTV and the indulgent idealisation of self-mutilation in emo subculture (a music, dress and lifestyle broadly celebrating the unbottling of angst) have increased the incidence of deliberate self-injury and provoked copycat behaviour among teenagers.”

In this technological age, the internet is becoming a major influence on the beliefs and perceptions of societal groups, especially since the development of new media technologies. Since the inception of social media, websites and chat rooms promoting and romanticising suicide and suicidal behaviours have become increasingly vivid and increasingly accessible. Recent news stories have blamed social networking sites, chat rooms and an association with emo for the promotion of teenage suicide worldwide (Britten and Savill 2008, Davies 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>; <http://www.news.com>). Despite this, little research has been done to determine social media's effects on positive perceptions of suicide and suicidal behaviours among teenagers. This study therefore attempts to investigate the representation of suicide and suicidal behaviour as norms on emo subculture social networking sites. Emo, an abbreviation of ‘emotional’ is a popular teenage subculture, similar to Goth and grunge, which commemorates “moody emotions through dark dress, melancholic behaviour and angsty music” (Davis 2008:55). The possible abuse of social media, by this teen subculture, as an instrument in the promotion and glorification of teenage depression, suicide and suicidal behaviour, is thus

the main focus of this study.

Various theories of suicide have been developed over time; however within the context of this study Joiner's Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behaviour will be discussed. In terms of media and communication theory, the Libertarian model of communication will set the background for this investigation.

Based on the following assertions this article seeks to identify the potential influence of social media on teenage suicide and aims to determine whether social media is being used as a tool to promote positive perceptions of and encourage suicidal behaviour among teenagers belonging to the emo subculture.

Suicide and suicidal behaviour

The notion of suicide was first defined in the Abbe Des Fontaines (1737) using the term "self-murder". Today, suicide can be defined in much the same way, as the act of deliberately ending one's own life. Often linked to depression and other mental disorders, suicide is a worldwide problem which transcends economic, demographic, religious and cultural differences. Age is also no barrier to suicide. Indeed, as the third leading cause of death among the youth (American Association of Suicidology 2008:1), teenage suicide is an ever-present aspect of contemporary society. Depression is a major cause of suicide internationally. The South Africa Depression and Anxiety Group claim that "90% of adolescents who die by suicide have an underlying mental illness" (2009:1). The American Association of Suicidology concurs that the presence of a psychiatric disorder is one of the factors that contribute to the risk for suicide among the youth (ASS 2008:2). These psychiatric disorders often set the president for suicide, attempted suicide and other suicidal behaviour. The reasons for these depressive conditions can be linked to social isolation, loneliness, hopelessness, abuse, conflict and loss. With a lack of support and a feeling that they have nowhere to turn, many teenagers see suicide as the only way to end their sadness. According to the World Health Organisation, "A suicide occurs every 40 seconds and an attempt is made every 3 seconds" (WHO 2000:5, SADAG 2009:1). Consequently, it is estimated that for every successful suicide there are between 100 and 200 unsuccessful attempts (AAS 2008:1). These figures suggest that the majority of people that have had successful suicides have had failed attempts in the past. As a result suicidal behaviours such as self-mutilation and attempted suicide are more common among teenagers than suicide itself. Notwithstanding the influence of the mental state of an individual on their predisposition to suicidal tendencies, other factors have also been addressed in terms of their propensity to enlist suicidal acts and behaviours. The media's influence on suicide is one of these factors.

Data on suicide in Africa is sketchy. South Africa's statistics have been greatly strengthened in recent years by the work of Schlebusch (2012), who is the founder of the Durban Parasuicide Study (DPS). According to Schlebusch (2012), suicides in South

Africa occur predominantly in males, while in non-fatal suicidal behaviours females predominate

In non-fatal suicidal behaviour, the peak age is in the 20-29 age group with a mean age of 25 years. About one third of hospital admissions for non-fatal suicidal behaviour involve children and adolescents. Generally the child and adolescent group is the second most at-risk age group for non-fatal suicides after young adults. Non-hospital based studies report suicidal behaviour / ideation in school children that range between 4% and 47% (Schlebusch 2012)

The media's influence on suicide

At present the impact of traditional media on suicidal behaviour cannot be confirmed, but a range of studies have suggested that diverse links between suicide and the media's influence are possible (Gould 2001, Phillips et al 1989, Romer et al 2006, Stack 2000). Although evidence of the media's influence was already seen in the 18th century, systematic investigations into copycat suicides based on media content were first attempted by the University of California's David Phillips, in the 1970s. During a 20-year study, Phillips looked at the increase in the number of suicides after a newspaper's front page report on suicide. Of the 33 months where suicide was on the front page, 26 months saw a significant increase in the number of suicides (Cited in Stack 2000). According to Stack, the largest copycat suicide effect was found after the suicide of American icon Marilyn Monroe (2000). An additional 303 suicides were reported during August 1962 in America alone. Although there is no direct evidence that the media plays a role in initiating suicidal behaviour there are case studies which suggest that the influence is certainly possible if not probable. To this end, the emergence of new media technologies and the ever-present role they play in modern day life may also add to the media's influence.

The impact of new media

With numerous studies looking at the effects of the media on suicide it is not difficult to support the argument that suicide is contagious (Gould 2001:200). The question is, do new forms of media such as social media also play a role in suicide contagion? In her article *Suicide and the Media*, Madelyn Gould maintains that "the media affords the opportunity for the indirect transmission of suicide contagion, the process by which one suicide becomes a compelling model for successive suicides" (2001:200). This insight could lead to the suggestion that any form of mediated information, including social media, has the ability to indirectly support contagion. At present, new forms of online media have become increasingly popular and increasingly stable parts of everyday life.

For teenagers, social media has become particularly important. The influence of this new media and the idea of this type of contagion came to the fore in 2007 when teenage suicide incidents in both Wales and Australia were blamed on social media, in particular social networking. Between January 2007 and January 2008, seven Welsh adolescents were suspected to have committed suicide. All the suicides were from the same town of Bridgend and were said to be linked through the popular social networking site, Bebo. A BBC news report on the suicides suggested that social networking sites may be “romanticising” suicide among the youth (BBC 2008). In a similar occurrence in April 2007 two Australian teenagers were found dead as a result of an apparent suicide pact. Both teenagers had profiles on MySpace a popular social networking site. After the suicides, information relating to suicide was found on their personal pages. “Poetry titled ‘suicide in the night’ and statements including ‘let Steph and me b free’ followed by ‘RIP Steph and Jodie’”, were vivid warning signs that went unnoticed (Davies 2008).

Emo and social media

In the spate of recent teenage suicides, many of the victims have been said to have identified with the popular teenage subculture - emo. Martin insists that although the teenagers he studied may have had contact and used the same suicide method, another striking similarity was the victims’ association with the cultural movement of emo (2006:1). The community and the media made claims of a possible suicide pact, but Martin holds that “identifying with emo may in itself influence toward suicidal behaviour” (2006:2).

What differentiates emo from other teenage subcultures is that emo was the first cultural movement to be created on the internet (Kelly & Simon 2007). The development of social networking sites gave outcast teens the opportunity to find each other online and share their thoughts, pain and above all music (Simon & Kelly 2007: 73-75). Rodriguez (2000) insists that “Emo kids rely heavily on the Internet to learn how to be emo”. He further states that there are plenty of websites dedicated to teaching teenagers and young adults exactly how to be “an emo kid” (cited in Ryalls 2006:6). In recent years emo has moved away from being seen as just a genre of music, to being recognised as a subcultural movement of the 2000’s. Emo is a mind-set, a way of life and forms part of many teenagers’ social identity. In their book, *Everybody Hurts*, Kelly and Simon explain that emo is “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” (2007:1).

Brown (2012) describes emo as a middle-class defined subculture, with a pronounced white female profile, a description that is reflected in the data collected in this study. While little data on the emo subculture in South Africa exists, it is interesting to note that the impact of the culture has been significant enough to warrant a parenting workshop on

the subject by Rapewise (Rapewise 2012) and an online dating service, Emo Chat that brings together all emo people from South Africa (Emo Chat 2012). In addition, recent media reports have noted the recent growth of the subculture, traditionally dominated by white youth, among the black populations of South Africa (Nxumalo 2011).

Emo, social media and suicidal behaviour

Blumler and Katz (1974) and McQuail (1983) agree that people use the media to fulfil specific needs. This implies that teenagers use social media as a means to satisfy certain desires. These could include the need for communication or escapism, or voyeuristic or narcissistic needs. For emo teenagers, social networks may fulfil the need of feeling part of a group, being able to communicate with similar people and express a similar identity. For many teenagers the online emo community may seem far more inviting than the judgmental world that they are used to.

Depression, a 'core emo value' (Simon & Kelly 2007:2), is one of the leading causes of teenage suicide internationally (AAS 2005, SADAG 2009, WHO 2009). Since emo developed through the internet, it is plausible to suggest that a large part of their communication is via the internet, in particular through social media. It is therefore possible that teenage emo social media groups may create a platform for the positive presentation of depression, suicide and suicidal behaviour (Simon & Kelly 2007: 73-75),.

According to a number of websites on the emo culture, "Emos hate themselves while Goths hate everyone" (Martin 2006:2). If one of the aspects of the emo subculture is a hate for oneself then as Martin suggests, emos may be in more danger of hurting themselves than any analogous subcultures. Cutting, self-harm and anorexia are also believed to be ubiquitous in the emo subculture. According to Sands (2006), "although the look is similar (to Goth), the point of distinction, frightening for schools and parents, is a celebration of self-harm" (cited in Ryalls 2006:12). Sands (2006) further argues that "emos exchange competitive messages on their teenage websites about the scars on their wrists and how best to display them" (cited in Ryalls 2006:12). This claim that cutting activities are a key element of the emo culture is another pointer towards the risk in identifying with emo (Martin 2006:2).

MySpace, Facebook, You Tube, chat rooms, blogs, forums and other social media are used as a form of online communication. On Facebook, over 500 groups relating to the emo lifestyle, culture and context have been created. These groups allow teenagers who adopt similar social contexts to communicate virtually through their online identity. Buchner et al (1995) and Giddens (1991) suggest that "the online realm may be adopted enthusiastically [by teens] because it represents 'their' space, visible to the peer group more than adult surveillance, an exciting yet relatively safe opportunity to conduct the social psychological task of adolescence – to construct, experiment with and present a reflexive project of the self in a social context" (cited in Livingstone

2008:396). But, is this environment really as safe as teenagers think it is? Kiesler and Kraut (1999) found that the more participants in a field trial used the internet the more lonely, socially unengaged and depressed they became (cited in Naito 2007:592). This could be particularly true among teenagers who spend more time on social networking sites than spending time having 'real' conversations with 'real' people.

Research design and methodology

This research takes an interpretative approach using qualitative data and is based on a thematic content analysis of user statements submitted to two emo groups on the social networking site, Facebook. By investigating the content and underlying themes of these groups we were able to actively engage with the message content and identify aspects of the perspectives of those who produced the message. In doing so it gave an idea of how emo teenagers interact on social networking sites. Focusing on the ideas found within the content examined allowed me to extract themes related to the research topic. The comments and notes written within the groups gave a clear indication of the subcultures attitude towards suicide and suicidal behaviour and helped to determine whether or not the social networking site is being used to promote and glorify this behaviour.

The data investigated consisted of the texts found within two separate emo groups, one South African and the other international, on the social networking site, Facebook. The wall and discussion board sections were studied and analysed. The groups accessed were directly related to the topic of this investigation and offered some insight into the use of this form of media by emo teenagers.

These groups were accessed on 27 April 2009. All textual content was collected from the wall and selected discussion boards and prepared for analysis. Once collected and sorted, the content was analysed and examined according to a theoretical framework. The study did not examine other influencing factors that may contribute to suicidal ideation or self-injury, but focused only on how the concepts of suicide and self-harm were represented on these two emo social networking groups.

Findings

The evidence drawn from the in-depth analysis of the findings of the content of the emo groups on Facebook, indicates specific aspects, or themes that are consistent, and therefore both revealing and relevant within the scope of this research report.

Based on the thematic analysis the following primary and secondary themes are evident:

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Primary Themes: | Normalisation, Nihilism, Glorification, Us versus Them, Acceptance |
| Secondary Themes: | Reason, Mockery |

These themes can be found in both the International and South African Facebook groups.

The first group, ...Emo..., is a global, 'just for fun' Emo group which, currently has 15 201 members (15 July 2009). This group offers members a place to meet people within the subculture with similar ideas, values and interests. The discussion board of the group gives members the opportunity to 'talk' about various topics and ideas. As part of this research four discussions that could offer a platform for the promotion of suicidal behaviour were analysed, these included "Cutting"; "Why everything sucks"; "whats your favourite form of torture self/to others" and "Kill yourself...". The second group, Emo..., is a common interest/philosophy group created in Cape Town, South Africa. It currently has 228 South African members. Compared to the international group this emo group is particularly small therefore content for this analysis was gained from the Emo... wall and from the discussion, "How do you know when you are Emo".

Throughout the discussions in both groups, certain lead 'characters' came to the fore getting very involved in the debates. Other members expressed their ideas in one post and then left the discussion and the majority of members had no involvement whatsoever in the discussions. This is indicative of the 1% – 9% – 90% participation inequality ratio suggested by Nielsen (2006). He states that "In most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% of users account for almost all the action". In the texts analysed by Nielsen 1 % of the participants accounted for the majority of contributions to the discussions. The same members were also found to contribute in all of the discussions analysed.

Themes identified

The abovementioned primary and secondary themes of normalisation, nihilism, glorification, Us versus Them, acceptance, reason and mockery will be discussed in this section.

Normalisation

The normalisation of activities otherwise regarded as destructive is a recurring theme throughout the analysed content. When discussions are steered towards the topic of self-harm there seems to be evidence of justification of actions or ideas as a normal part of life. The normalisation of such activities as a form of "stress relief", suggests that it is an acceptable way to deal with underlying emotional issues. The following posts illustrate this theme:

| Discussion board theme | Participant | Post |
|------------------------|-------------|--|
| **Cutting** | 5 | <i>"it counters emotional pain with physical pain to me it relieves stress people smoke, do drugs I choose to cut"</i> |
| | 15 | Um what I think of cutting is that like..... some people punch walls etc 2 get rid of their pain (emotional pain) but us we cut to do the same as them... so yeah.... They got their way of getting rid of pain and being hapi :D but we cut to get hapi so yeah\... that's just what I think :D.... and btw I think THERES NUFIN RONG WIT CUTTING!! |
| | 25 | if you cut that's fine it releases your deep sad or angry emotions.....I cut.....then after I feel not so angry... |

The topic of suicide was not discussed at length within the content analysed, however a normalisation of the act can be seen in a discussion on what it means to be emo. When defining emo, one respondent stated,

"Emo is one of the hardest things, to explain. People hate emos, b/c they view us as suicidal, cry babies, or just weak. That's NOT what emo is. Suicidal yes, at times. But, don't judge me for being emo. It's not what I chose to be. It's just what I am."

This post illustrates the idea that being emo is not a choice and that suicide is at times part of the subculture, it is also implied that this is just a normal part of the culture.

Nihilism

Based on philosophy, Nihilism is often seen as an extreme form of cynicism that rejects all life, and is frequently "associated with extreme pessimism and a radical scepticism that condemns existence" (Pratt 2005). In a similar sense, Nihilism is the idea that life is futile and without meaning or purpose. According to Kelly and Simon depression and effortlessness are two of the 'core emo values' (2007:2). These values can be seen as an expression of Nihilism in that they confirm the ideas that there is no point to life and there is no point in making an effort to be happy, as you will gain no meaning from it. Throughout the various content examined in this research, the idea of Nihilism is

evident in some of the member's discussions of the worthlessness of life. This expression of a negative outlook on life can be seen in the statements made by the group members in the table below.

| Discussion board theme | Participant | Post |
|------------------------|-------------|---|
| Why everything sucks | 3 | <i>"everth sucks cuz nobody understand us and my life z a piece of shit that i would like to throw it now and end it as soon as i can".</i> |
| | 6 | <i>"everything suks epecially ppl cuz they dont understand u at all and think ur wierd i get made fun of for being emo.....and thats just some of the reasons my life sucks.....and alot of ppl just dont understand.....how i feel"</i> |
| **Cutting** | 22 | <i>"i really dont care what my family thinks of me. my mom's a drugaddict and my dad abandoned me... i live in a town i hate while the city i love is 6 hours away from me. im friendless in the town, and LOVED in the city. does anyone wish to argue with me about why i cut my wrists?"</i> |
| Kill Yourself | 2 | Responding to the post Kill Yourself respondent two replied <i>"I might just do that, no1 would miss me anyways"</i> |
| Emo... wall | | <i>"Life is so dipressing...."</i> |

Glorification

Glorification of the emo subculture in general and the suicidal behaviours connected to it was clearly evident in the content analysed. The honour and praise of self-harm was a particularly dominant theme, where members saw the self-destructive and injurious behaviour as "good" and "cool", negating the fact that it is dangerous and may result in life threatening situations.

Cutting, a form of self-harm said to be linked to the emo subculture was a topic of lively debate on the international emo group's discussion board. The discussion was initiated by the following post:

"I'm an emo and I always cut and then got sent to the hospital for a very long time. But I still cut does anyone else find that self-injury helps them more than talking it out?"

The following posts, in response to this statement indicates a clear glorification of the risky activity,

| Discussion board theme | Participant | Post |
|------------------------|-------------|--|
| **Cutting** | 7 | <i>Cutting is a good way to get out stress. Better than Drugs"</i> |
| | 12 | <i>Combining smoking n cutting is cool"</i> |

Us versus Them

Joining an online social networking group often means joining an online community. Humans are naturally social beings and according to Williams (2008), "our need to be part of a community, any community" is a major draw card for joining online networking groups. He suggests that "because so few [of] us take an active part in the physical community in which we live we have extended our [social] needs to our technology" (Williams 2008). For emos social networks allow for online interactions which would not necessarily take place in the physical environment (Simon and Kelly 2007: 73-75). Members of online groups are usually attracted to them because of a similar interest in what the group has to offer and the ideas it supports. In the case of this research a connection to the emo subculture is the attraction. By joining these groups, members frequently develop a sense of belonging, camaraderie and sharing that was often missing from their offline lives (Williams 2008). The theme of Us versus Them is developed from the in-group (members within a group), out-group (people who are not part of a group) dynamic that exists within social structures. Thomas et al (2004:165) explain that "[y]our perception of yourself as an individual can only be in relation to others and your status within social groups". Based on the ideas of Bennett et al (2004:2) prejudicial attitudes towards out-groups develop early in life. According to Aboud (1988:24), children notice similarities and differences between themselves with ease and "dissimilar people are disliked" (cited in Bennett et al 2004:2). The existence of in-groups and out-groups leads to the development of an Us versus Them mentality. 'Us' in the form of a community is expressed in the following posts:

| Discussion board theme | Participants | Post |
|------------------------|--------------|--|
| **Cutting** | 9 | <i>"oh yay. dudes, at leas i no i ish not alone! seriously, i dont no any1 els who cuts. i feel so alone..."</i> |

| | | |
|--|----|---|
| | 27 | <i>it's so nice having people that understand. Cutting cleans the mind and I forget all pains and troubles are forgotten for that moment in time.</i> |
|--|----|---|

When members come into contact with people who do not share the same ideas as them an Us versus Them mindset often develops, where the “other” is seen as an “emo hater” who does not understand the lifestyle, emotions or culture. The following posts indicate this feeling of community based in the idea of Us versus Them.

| Discussion board theme | Participant | Post |
|--|-------------|---|
| Kill Yourself | 6 | <i>“just becuz we r different u make fun of us. just becuz we keep to ourselves u stay away. just becuz we might (or might not) cut ourselves, u cuss at us and say we r stupid and dont mean anything to the world. im sorry if we r soooo terrible to the world's population, but we're here, and we're here to stay. just because u hav the emotional range of a glass of water doesnt mean u hav to make fun of othrs who r more emotional. emo: «emo»tional, «emo»tionally sensitive. othr defs r out there too. just becuz we're different u hav to make fun of us and u know wat? we r sooo more matire than all of u haters cuz if we were u, e wouldnt make fun of emos, while here u r laughing and pissin evryone off by putting them doWwn. we r the mature ones here and u self-centered emo hating fuckos bttr leave us alone and stop messin with us.”</i> |
| What is your favourite form of torture self/ to others | 9 | <i>“yes i agree with hannah!! and sophoa fragapen and steive emodeath shut the fuck up!!! if u r against us hating our life and cutting our self and is just going to sit here and type that much just to do that thats pretty stupid!!</i> |
| Emo... Wall | | <i>no matter what anyone says emo rocks and all you ppl commenting on emo, go get a life. u dont know anything bout emo, u probably dont know any emos, and u dont have a life coz u come on facebook to post shit bout emo</i> |

For teenagers that are involved in the emo subculture and the various risky activities that it may involve, this sense of not being alone and having someone else who is in a similar situation to talk to, must be of relief and comfort. This relates to the next theme, that of acceptance.

Acceptance

Acceptance as a theme of this study refers to acceptance as a vital part of teenage social development. Humans are social beings, therefore certain social needs have to be fulfilled in order for teenagers to develop effectively. These needs, according to Humphrey (2002:35) include: (1) “The need for affection, which involves acceptance and approval by persons, (2) the need for belonging, which involves acceptance and approval by the group and (3) the need for mutuality, which involves cooperation, mutual helpfulness and group loyalty”. This need for group acceptance and loyalty is the underlying essence of this theme. Acceptance also forms part of the previous theme of Us versus Them in that the referenced ‘Us’ implies a measure of acceptance of those who belong. This theme, in terms of the acceptance of emo in general and of self-harm is expressed within the content of the texts. As referred to earlier, cutting is often associated with the emo subculture (Sands 2006, Martin 2006). This association has been highlighted throughout the various discussions and the acceptance of this self-harming behaviour is clearly stated. The following posts indicate the lack of condemnation of self-harm and may have the capability to result in an encouragement of such behaviour.

| Discussion board theme | Participant | Post |
|------------------------|-------------|--|
| **Cutting** | 4 | <i>“okay, not gonna say that you should cut. but it think if you have a way of calming down and releasing any pain you have. then do it.”</i> |
| | 23 | <i>“I cut and I have multiple friends who all cut. We know we have problems and need to work through them but it’s hard. People put this lable on cutters without any face behind. It’s like druggies. You automatically assume there bad people but there not. But cutting is like my personal drug. A legal one”</i> |

The abovementioned primary themes focus on the emo perspective. The secondary themes of reason and mockery, indicate the presence of those who do not agree with the emo culture and are against their way of life.

Reason

The theme of reason looks at posts expressing practical alternatives and ideas that may be helpful to people.

The following statement was made in response to the cutting discussion:

“ I would really be sad if one of my buddies were cutting themselves, I cant take seeing people hurting themselves like that, its really sad, if I in my life can only at least stop one person from huting themselves I would be so glad, everyone always say” what a freak or whatever” but its sad, ppl please stop cutting,you ca come cut me, just don’t cut yourself”

This is an example of reason although the theme of reason is present it is not commonly found throughout the varying texts and discussions.

Mockery

Although Facebook groups are created for people with similar ideals and interests, a range of people who are against the emo subculture have joined as members. This means that throughout the discussions, mocking, sarcastic, insulting and vilifying messages can be found. Usually referred to as Trolls, these members make sarcastic and contemptuous remarks which act as disruptions to the discussions and often result in an online attack between the ‘emo’ and the ‘emo hater’. Trolls are traditionally defined as “members of a community or usenet group who make posts deliberately designed to attract responses of outrage or indignation The majority of the trolls found on the Facebook groups studied can be referred to as “malicious trolls,” as they enter the discussions with the intent of being deliberately abusive and condescending (<http://communitiesonline.homestead.com/dealingwithtrolls.html>). This maliciousness can be seen in the group, *Kill Yourself*, where regular troll, Steve emodeath initiates a discussion with the following post:

“seriously.. do it.
rid the world of your faggotry”

Other example of mockery can be seen in the following posts:

| Discussion board theme | Participant | Post |
|------------------------|-------------|--|
| **Cutting** | 2 | “ oMG u THInK sO??// i’M bLusHING!11 IOLz!!!11 leTS gEt TogETheR aND cUT OuR RiS TS aND cRy tiLL oUr MatCHinG eYE LyNeR RuNNSss!!!!!!1 |
| | 28 | <i>You fuckers make me sick. You are the lowest of the low. Seriously? cutting yourselves because of your “problems”? You are all just wbinny drama little drama queens... Grow the fuck up”</i> |

| | | |
|---------------|---|---|
| Kill Yourself | 8 | <p><i>"You all agree with each other because you are all fad following faggots. You are sheeple not people. You all have zero personality You all smelly funny You all walk around with a face like a smacked arse You all whine about how the world is against you You all don't have real problems You all cut yourselves but fail ;(</i></p> <p><i>Wow what an amazing contribution you are to society!!!:O Using/wasting up doctors/nurses time and resources because of your failed 100th suicide attempt. Cut downwards not across newfags. Hmmm, very individualistic if you askin' me.....not!"</i></p> |
| Emo... Wall | | <i>"Emo is the gay form of Satanism"</i> |

Depending on the nature of the discussions, trolls may tend to dominate the conversation with condescending, cynical and hurtful comments.

From the above analysis it is clear that the two emo groups studied are being used by people both inside and outside the subculture to discuss a variety of topical issues. Although a range of topics and discussions can be found in each group, this research focused on the discussion board topics that had the potential to highlight teenage depression, suicide and suicidal behaviour.

Discussion

Based on the thematic content analysis of the Facebook groups and an examination of the uses of this form of social media, a number of themes relating to the topic of the research emerged.

A normalisation, glorification and acceptance of depression and self-mutilation were prevalent throughout the online dialogues examined. Cutting as a major form of self-harm was brought up in almost all of the discussions examined and the overall emo perspective of the activity was found to be positive, with teenagers expressing their affirmative opinions of the behaviour openly and without reserve. This positive portrayal of self-harm not only has the potential to encourage the behaviour but may also give teenagers a means to justify their activities based on its acceptance by others within the groups. As mentioned earlier, cutting is regarded by some as a key element of the emo subculture (Martin 2006, Sands 2006). Therefore, simply identifying with emo may be all that is needed to justify self-harming activities.

The theme of nihilism which indicates an underlying belief that life is pointless and futile, was present within the discussions. The acceptance and encouragement of this idea within the groups could promote the belief that life is not worth living and in turn may have the potential to influence the thoughts and attitudes of other members of the emo groups.

The theme of 'Us versus Them' signifies the development of a feeling of community within the groups based on emo versus "non emo" or "emo hater" identification. This community helps to create a feeling of belonging and sharing among the members and allows them to find solace and acceptance from other teenagers who are experiencing their lives within the same social context. According to Blumler and Katz (1974) and Mc Quail (1983) the media is used as a means to fulfil specific needs. Based on the analysis of the research one of those needs may include the need to be social. This need to be social and part of a friendship group or community falls into the third category of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, namely Love and Belonging (1943).

The problem that emerges with the idea of Us versus Them is that teenagers are often very impressionable and may take on dangerous behaviours or activities that have been discussed, as a means to 'fit in' even more with the members of the groups. This means that teenagers, who are part of these groups and have seen that self-harm is regarded as a 'normal' and 'cool' part of the subculture, may start cutting in an attempt to feel more like the other emos within the group.

The secondary theme of mockery had an impact on the flow of the discussions within the groups. Hateful, insulting and condescending remarks were found in all of the discussion boards analysed. These negative comments have the potential to demoralise, alienate and vilify teenagers who are looking for a place to meet people who are similar to them. Consequently, the input by trolls may be damaging in that it may help to strengthen some emo teenagers' beliefs that they do not belong and are a burden to those around them.

The various themes discussed above can be linked to Joiner's Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behaviour. Joiner's theory says that in order for people to commit suicide they need to have a "sense of thwarted belongingness", "a perception of functioning as a burden on others" and the "acquired capability for suicide" (Anestis 2009). Based on the themes of this research, elements of each of these predispositions to suicide are evident. A sense of thwarted belongingness, as suggested by Joiner, refers to the person's feelings of unbearable isolation and a belief that no one understands them and they have no one to relate to. These groups and social networking sites offer teenage emos a place to meet up with people who are similar to them and understand their lifestyles. However, teenagers who are depressed may focus on the comments of the trolls and may end up believing even more that they don't fit in, in neither the real nor online worlds. The second part of Joiner's theory is the "perception of functioning as a burden". This refers to the person's belief that the lives of those around them would be better if they weren't around anymore. Once again trolls within the emo Facebook groups may have an impact on the teenagers' ideas that they are a burden to those around them. Comments such as

“Im sure your families are so glad your little problems in your head are being solved while they cry at the hospital”,

“Oh i’ll cut my wrist, the hospital will fix me, too bad other people dying from car crashes will die because under funded hospitals cant afford enough doctors,”

exemplify the suggestion that emos that cut themselves are a burden to their families and to those around them.

The final element of Joiner’s theory is that in order for somebody to commit suicide they have to have a “capability for suicide”. This refers to the person’s ability to become accustomed to pain and the fear of death (Anestis 2009). This familiarisation and acceptance of pain is evident throughout the discussions and is illustrated in the glorification, normalisation and acceptance of self-harm and cutting. The illustration of the realisation of all three elements of what the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behaviour describes as key for a person to commit suicide, within the content analysed indicates that social networking groups may not be as safe as people believe them to be.

A lack of restriction of content found on social media groups is related to the Libertarian model of communication. Since freedom of expression and anonymity are seen as essential parts of the internet it becomes evident that the Facebook groups examined in this research illustrate the use of social media as a form of freedom of expression. Despite the reporting and banning functions, which form a security measure on the Facebook site, teenagers are still given free rein on the groups they can join, the friends they can invite and the comments they can make. As a result teenagers use these social networking groups to express their views on various topics related to the emo culture, this expression may however have the power to promote risky behaviour in an already ‘at risk’ portion of society.

As a result of the findings of this research it can be suggested that social media, in particular emo groups on the social networking site Facebook, are being used as a tool to promote positive perceptions of and encourage suicidal behaviour among the teenage emo subculture. Consequently, it becomes overwhelmingly apparent that social forms of new media may indeed be contributing to the development of positive perceptions of suicidal behaviour, and as such, play a role in suicide contagion. From the analysis of the data investigated, the promotion of depression and suicidal behaviour was evident. Self-harm, particularly cutting is viewed and expressed by participating members as an acceptable and normal part of the emo subculture. And, although suicide is not a major topic of discussion, these groups give teenagers the opportunity to discuss issues surrounding the subject and allow for the positive representation of suicidal behaviours.

The findings of this research establish that teenage emos are using the social networking groups studied to discuss issues of interest and that some of these discussions could lead to the glorification and promotion of depression and self-harm.

Conclusion

The idea that the media plays a role in suicide contagion is not a new matter of concern. Researchers have been trying to determine the media's influence on suicide as far back as the 18th century (Stack 2000). Today however, the interest in the impact of traditional media has been overshadowed by the interest in the role new forms of media, particularly social media, play in the contagion of suicide. As technology develops and new forms of communication media emerge, the potential for new forms of contagion develop. It was therefore the aim of this research to examine this new technology and determine whether or not social media in the form of social networking sites, has the potential to offer a platform for the promotion of suicide and suicidal behaviour. Focusing on the teenage subculture of emo, which developed on the internet (Simon & Kelly 2007), and examining their use of the social networking site Facebook, it was determined, using a thematic content analysis, that the emo groups studied were being used as a tool to promote positive perceptions of self-injury and suicide. The use of this type of media as a means to promote and justify self-harming and suicidal behaviour highlights the concern that the internet is an often unsafe and risky place for children and teenagers to spend their time.

This is a baseline exploratory study on a topic that has not been extensively explored. While the research findings are interesting, further research is required. The focus of the study was on the role of social networks in creating positive perceptions of self-harm and suicide among a particular teenage subculture and did not focus on other factors that may influence suicidal ideation or instances of self-injury.

Although social networking sites are designed to offer a platform for communication and are not necessarily developed with the intention to cause harm, they do have the potential to open the doors for the promotion of a variety of risky and even dangerous behaviours.

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