

Suicide and Emo Youth Subculture – A Case Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Depression and suicide present a serious health problem especially for teenagers as they are increasingly diagnosed with mood disorders of different severity, possibly leading to suicidal activity. Reported here is a misfortunate young girl who committed suicide by jumping from high altitude. She left a suicide note which, together with her behavior in the death-preceding period, pointed to her apparently belonging to an Emo subculture. Although few and scarce, most existing articles and reports on Emo subculture found that its members like to focus on negative things, dark premonitions and deprivation of enjoyment, like self harm and suicide but no scientific information are available about the characteristics, trends and possible suicidal tendencies of children and adolescents who belong to this subgroup. It is for the future researches to answer whether this type of behavior and music preference are causal factors for increased suicidal vulnerability, or personal characteristics and anamnesis, upbringing and mental health status are actual sources of the problem.

Key words: *suicide, teenagers, Emo subculture, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Introduction

Suicide presents an important public health problem and is one of the leading causes of violent deaths worldwide. It is currently the fourth leading cause of death in children between the ages of 10 and 15, and the third leading cause of death for adolescents aged 15 to 25. Many risk factors have been identified; most of them are complex and interact with one another. There is a general opinion among researches that mental disorders, lead by depression, substance abuse, coping strategy and parent-child relationship are significant predictive risk factors^{1,2}. It has been reported that depression affects 2 percent of pre-puberty children and 5–8 percent of adolescents, with clinical spectrum ranging from simple sadness to major depression^{3–5}.

Recent suicidal case of a schoolgirl, who apparently belonged to the Emo subculture, has drawn public attention and, once again, opened the question of possible connection between a particular sociological movement and its teen followers to their mental health and suicidal behavior. Several studies have investigated whether identification with Goth subculture is associated with violence, self harm and attempted suicide among teens^{6,7}. In re-

cent years the media has linked the Emo scene closely with self harm, but there have been no scientific analyses on this topic.

Emo, short for »emotional music«, is an evolving and complex youth subculture. So called Emo-kids listen to specific music characterized by feelings of psychical vulnerability and willingness to express heart-felt confessions about adolescence and its demands. It is a type of revolution among youth which has its roots in the mid 80s. What separated Emo from punk and hardcore rock was the obvious move away from angry songs of rebellion and disdain for authority to more sensitive performance⁸. Discussions about Emo subculture vary from those describing it as extremely dark, full of people who are depressed and almost suicidal, to those who see Emo as a new trend among youths who like to be unique and want to show the society that they are absolutely free from any type of social bounds. This presumed freedom includes the freedom of emotions too⁹.

The case presented here illustrates the need for methodical research in order to determine whether belonging to a certain type of subculture, such as Emo, could be

considered a suicidal risk factor and assessed accordingly – principally by parents and friends, and subsequently by therapists, different caretakers and educators.

Case Report

The body of a 16-year-old girl was found on the pavement of city's main square in early morning hours after she jumped from the altitude of several meters. She was seen walking around the city the previous evening and even exploring the exact place of the unfortunate event with her boyfriend. According to the psychological autopsy, she was a typical teenage girl, without any particular problems within her family or within the school environment. She lived in a complete, middle-class family; she finished her high school junior class with excellent marks but then transferred to attend an art school. Nobody had noticed any considerable changes in her behavior or mood quality, nor any signs of depression, attempts of isolation or self-retreat.

She left a suicide note, together with a drawing of a black and white cartoon character resembling those usually drawn by Emo-kids. Her suicidal note did not put any light on the possible reason for committing a suicide. It did show, however, that she had been thinking about taking her life for some time. She expressed a significantly low level of life satisfaction; she didn't see the purpose of everyday routine and said that things which had been imposed onto her never made her happy. Although, as she has written, she had been surrounded with her beloved friends, with whom she had spent a memorable last summer and some nice times recently, she stated she would have never been what she wanted to be – »a kid from a cartoon, without any obligations«. At the time of suicide she was dressed completely in black, wearing same type of clothes she had been wearing in the recent time.

The autopsy revealed she was a tiny girl, with pale skin, dark make-up and dyed, black hair. The cause of death was craniocerebral trauma due to a high altitude jump. Toxicological analysis showed that at the time of death she was not under the influence of alcohol or any kind of illicit drugs or medicaments.

Discussion

Once more the presented case opens up a question if music and fashion styles can be indicators of mental health status in young people. In recent time ever more stories about self destructive teenagers can be found in newspaper headlines. Not rarely they are called Emo generation. In scientific world little is written or known about Emo culture, but often it is talked about in the media. Is it just another public opinion fiction or a serious

behavioral problem of puberty and early adolescence? Depicting the Emo lifestyle as a dangerous teen trend the Russian government is drafting a proposal that will regulate Emo websites and ban the black clad kids from schools and government buildings. The bill about governmental strategy in the sphere of spiritual and ethical education aims to crush the Emo subculture labeling it as a social danger and a threat to national stability¹⁰. Critics of Emo music and lifestyle think that they, with their themes of sadness and despair, lead to a death preoccupation while others argue that Emos are extremely vulnerable, depressed teenagers with the sensitiveness and ingenuousness of an innocent kid which could explain why members of this subculture are called Emo-kids⁸⁻¹¹. Music makes them particularly passionate, making their hearts tremble and bringing tears in their eyes. In fact, Emo kids are never ashamed of those emotional outbursts.

In some older studies authors have discussed if the concept of »subculture« could be applied to depressed and suicidal teenagers, and pointed to the impact of music on thoughts and attitudes about suicide^{12,13}. It is not just Emo music that has been the subject of scrutiny. Heavy metal, rock and rap music have also been blamed for antisocial behavior and for contributing to suicidal ideation. In 1990 the study of Scheel and Westfeld showed that heavy metal male fans had less strong reasons for leaving and female fans had more suicidal thoughts¹⁴. Another study pointed that music preferences contributed to the prediction of suicidal ideation in male students alone¹⁵.

However, recent studies have not accepted that music is a causal factor and suggested that music preference is more indicative of emotional vulnerability¹⁶. Some psychologists believe that suicide is not a symptom of Emo culture, assuring that every teen group has emotionally troubled kids^{10,11}. Moreover, most of them suggest that expressing feelings of angst or depression is healthier than bottling them up. Teen age is a period of life when the mind set up is quite unstable and emotions are at a very high level⁹. However, for a large majority of teenagers and youth, listening to music has a positive mood effect. A culture's epicenter, its music, as well as life style and fashion, all serve as an excellent meeting point of ideas, likes and dislikes, bringing people closer together. Because of that it is reasonable to presume that those involved with Emo culture are just like-minded young people who struggle to find their way into adulthood¹¹.

We deem it is for the future researches to determine whether belonging to the certain type of subculture and preferring certain music could be considered as suicidal risk factor or it serves more as a beacon call of a young mind for special attention in such a troublesome life period.

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SAMOUBOJSTVO I EMO POTKULTURA MLADIH – ANALIZA SLUČAJA

SAŽETAK

Depresija i samoubojstvo predstavljaju ozbiljan zdravstveni problem posebice u tinejdžera gdje se bilježi porast u dijagnosticiranju poremećaja raspoloženja različite težine koji mogu dovesti i do suicidalne aktivnosti. U radu je opisan slučaj djevojke koja je počinila samoubojstvo skokom s visine. Ostavila je oproštajno pismo koje, zajedno s njezinim ponašanjem u razdoblju prije izvršenja samoubojstva, ukazuje na njezinu očiglednu pripadnost Emo potkulturi. Iako rijetki, većina postojećih članaka i izvješća o Emo potkulturi zaključuju da su njezini pripadnici usmjereni na negativno, imaju zloslutne predošjećaje, uskraćuju si životne radosti, ponekad se samoozljeđuju i/ili izvrše samoubojstvo. Međutim, znanstvene informacije o karakteristikama, trendovima i mogućim samoubilačkim tendencijama djece i adolescenata koji pripadaju ovoj podgrupi su nedostupne. Buduća istraživanja trebaju dati odgovor je li ovaj tip ponašanja i muzičkog odabira uzročni faktor za porast suicidalne ranjivosti ili su osobne karakteristike i anamneza, odgoj i psihički zdravstveni status stvarni izvori problema.