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“Just Emotional People”? Emo Culture and the Anxieties of Disclosure

[Michelle Phillipov](#) | [Volume 12](#) | [Issue 5](#) | [December 2009](#) | ['disclose'](#)

In an article in the *Sunday Tasmanian* shortly after the deaths of Melbourne teenagers Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier in 2007, Tasmanian Catholic Schools Parents and Friends Federation president Bill Button claimed: “Parents are concerned because all of a sudden their child, if they have access to a computer, can turn into an Emo” (qtd. in Vowles 1).

For a few months in 2007, the dangers of emo and computer use were significant themes in Australian newspaper coverage. Emo, an abbreviation of the terms “emocore” or “emotional hardcore”, is a melodic subgenre of punk rock music, characterised by “emotional” or personal themes. Its followers, who adopt a look that includes black stovepipe jeans, dyed black hair and side-parted long fringes, might merely have been one of the many “tribes” (Bennett 605) that characterise contemporary youth culture. However, over an approximately five-month period in 2007, the deaths of three teenagers in two separate incidents—the murder Carly Ryan in February and the suicides of Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier in April—were linked to the emo subculture and to the social networking site MySpace, both of which were presented as dangerous and worrying developments in contemporary youth culture.

This paper explores the media discourse surrounding emo and social networking technologies via a textual analysis of key reports and commentary pieces published in major metropolitan and national newspapers around the times of the three deaths. Although only a small selection of the 140-odd articles published Australia-wide is discussed here, those selected are indicative of broader trends in the newspaper coverage, and offer a means of examining how these incidents were constructed and understood within mainstream media discourse.

Moral panics in relation to youth music and subculture are not uncommon in the news and other media (Cohen; Goode and Ben-Yehuda; Redhead; Rose 124-145; Weinstein 245-263; Wright). Moral panics related to social networking technologies have also been subject to academic study (Hinduja and Patchin 126; Livingstone 395; Marwick). In these cases, moral panic is typically understood as a force of normalisation and social control. The media discourses surrounding the deaths of the three young women possessed many of the features of moral panic described in this literature, including a build-up of concern disproportionate to “real” risk of harm (see Goode and Ben-Yehuda 33-41). But while emo youth were sometimes constructed as a straightforward “folk devil” (Cohen 11) or “enemy” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 31) in need of clear sanctions—or, alternatively, as *victims* of a clear folk devil or enemy—the “problem” of emo was also framed as a product of much broader problems of youth culture.

Connections between emo, MySpace, the deaths of the three young women were only ever tenuously established in the news

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reports and commentaries. That the stories appeared to be ultimately concerned with a broader group of (non-subculturally affiliated) young people suggests that this coverage can be seen as symptomatic of what John Hartley describes—in the context of reporting on young people more generally—as a “profound uncertainty in the textual system of journalism about where the line that defines the boundary of the social should be drawn” (17). The result is a “cultural thinking-out-loud” (Hartley 17) in which broader cultural anxieties are expressed and explored, although they are not always clearly articulated. While there were some attempts in these reports and commentaries on the three “emo deaths” to both mobilise and express specific fears (such as the concern that computer access can turn a child “into an Emo”), the newspaper coverage also expressed broader anxieties about contemporary youth culture. These can be described as anxieties about disclosure.

In the cases of Carly Ryan, Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier, these were disclosures that were seen as simultaneously excessive and inadequate. Specifically, the newspaper coverage focused on *both* the dangers of young people’s disclosures of traditionally private material, *and* the ways in which the apparent secrecy of these disclosures made them inaccessible to adult authorities who could otherwise have “done something” to prevent the tragedies from occurring.

Although some of these concerns were connected to the specificities of emo subcultural expression—the “excessive” emotionality on display and the impenetrability of subcultural imagery respectively—they were on the whole linked to a broader problem in contemporary youth culture that was seen to apply to all young people, whether or not they were emo-identified. Specifically, the deaths of Carly Ryan, Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier provided opportunities for the expression of anxieties that the private lives of young people were becoming increasingly “unknowable” to adult authorities, and, hence, that youth culture itself was increasingly “unknowable”.

The Case of Carly Ryan

In February 2007, the body of 15-year-old Carly Ryan was found in Horseshoe Bay at Port Elliot, just south of Adelaide. Several weeks later, a 48-year-old man and his 17-year-old son were arrested for her murder. The murder trial began January 2009, with the case still continuing at the time of writing. In the early reports of her death, particularly in Adelaide’s *Advertiser*, Ryan’s MySpace page was the focus of much discussion, since the teenager was understood to have presented an image of herself on the site that left her vulnerable to predators, including to one of her alleged killers with whom she had been regularly communicating in the weeks leading up to her murder (Littlely, Salter, and Wheatley 4; Hunt 2; Wheatley 4).

The main report in *The Advertiser*, described Ryan’s MySpace page as “bizarre” and as “paint[ing] a disturbing picture of a world of drugs and sex” (Littlely, Salter and Wheatley 4). Ryan was reported as listing her interests as “drugs, smoking, music and sex”, to have described herself as “bisexual”, and to have uploaded images of a “girl injecting herself, a woman with a crucifix rammed down her throat and a woman with her lips stitched together” (Littlely, Salter, and Wheatley 4).

Attempts were made to link such “graphic” imagery to the emo subculture (Littlely, Salter, and Wheatley 1; see also O’Donohue 5). The imagery was seen as subcultural insofar as it was seen to reflect a “bizarre teenage ‘goth’ and ‘emo’ world” (Littlely, Salter, and Wheatley 1), a world constructed both as dangerous (in the sense that her apparent involvement in subcultural activities was presented as “disturbing” and something that put her at risk of

harm) and impenetrable (in the sense that subcultural imagery was understood not simply as harmful but also as “bizarre”). This linking of Ryan’s death to the emo and goth subcultures was done despite the fact that it was never clearly substantiated that the teenager did indeed classify herself as either “emo” or “goth”, and despite the fact that such links were contested by Ryan’s friends and family (see: “Gothic Images” 15; Riches 15).

The repeated linking, then, of Ryan’s death to her (largely unconfirmed) subcultural involvement can be seen as one way of containing the anxieties surrounding her apparently “graphic” and “inappropriate” online disclosures. That is, if such disclosures can be seen as the expressions of a minority subcultural membership, rather than a tendency characteristic of young people more generally, then the risks they pose may be limited only to subcultural youth. Such a view is expressed in comments like Bill Button’s about computer use and emo culture, cited above. Research, however, suggests that with or without subcultural affiliation, some young users of MySpace use the site to demonstrate familiarity with adult-oriented behaviours by “posting sexually charged comments or pictures to corroborate their self-conception of maturity”—irrespective of whether these reflect actual behaviours offline (Hinduja and Patchin 136, 138). As such, this material is inevitably a construction rather than a straightforward reflection of identity (Liu).

On the whole, Ryan’s death was presented as simultaneously the product of a dangerous subcultural affiliation, *and* an extreme case of the dangers posed by unsupervised Internet use to all young people, not just to those emo-identified. For example, the *Sunday Mail* article “Cyber Threat: The New Place Our Kids Love to Play” warned of the risks of disclosing too much personal information online, suggesting that all young people should restrict access to private information only to people that they know (Novak 12).

Such reports reflect a more widespread concern, identified by Marwick, that social networking sites lower cultural expectations around privacy and encourage young people to expose more of their lives online, hence making them vulnerable to potential harm (see also De Souza and Dick; Hinduja and Patchin). In the case of Carly Ryan, the concern that too much (and inappropriate) online disclosure poses dangers for young people is also subtended by anxieties that the teenager and her friends also did not disclose *enough* information—or, at least, did not disclose in a way that could be made comprehensible and accessible to adult authorities.

As a result, the so-called “graphic” material on Ryan’s MySpace page (and on the pages of her friends) was described as both inappropriately public *and* inappropriately hidden from public view. For example, a report in *The Advertiser* spoke of a “web of secret internet message boards” that “could potentially hold vital clues to investigating detectives” but which “have been blocked by their creators to everyone but [Ryan’s] tight-knit group of friends” (Littlely, Salter, and Wheatley 1). This “web of secret internet message boards” was, in fact, MySpace pages set to “private”: that is, pages accessible to approved friends only.

The privacy settings on profiles are thus presented as an obfuscatory mechanism, a refusal on the part of young people to disclose information that might be of assistance to the murder case. Yet these young people were conforming to the very advice about online safety provided in many of the news reports (such as the article by Novak) and echoed in material released by the Australian Government (such as the *Cybersmart Guide for Families*): that is, in order to protect their privacy online, they should restrict access to their social networking profiles only to friends that they know.

This contradictory message—that too much disclosure online poses safety risks, while conservative approaches to online privacy are

evidence of secrecy and obfuscation—expresses a rather tangled set of anxieties about contemporary youth culture. This is part of the “cultural thinking-out-loud” that Hartley characterises as a feature of news reporting on youth more generally. The attempt to make sense of an (apparently motiveless) murder of a young woman with reference to a set of contemporary youth cultural practices that are described as both dangerous and incomprehensible not only constructs technology, subculture and young people as problems to be “fixed”, but also highlights the limited ways through which mainstream news coverage comes to “know” and understand youth culture.

Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier: The “MySpace Suicide Girls”

News reporting on Carly Ryan’s death presented youth culture as a disturbing and dangerous underworld hidden from adult view and essential “unknowable” by adult authorities. In contrast, the reports and commentaries on the deaths of Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier only a few months later sought to subsume events that may otherwise have been viewed as inexplicable into categories of the already-known. Gater and Gestier were presented not as victims of a disturbing and secret underground subculture, but a more fully knowable mainstream bullying culture. As a result, the dangers of disclosure were presented differently in this case.

In April 2007, the bodies of 16-year-old friends Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier were found in bushland on the outskirts of Melbourne. The pair was understood to have hanged themselves as part of a suicide pact. Like the reporting on Carly Ryan’s death, anxieties were raised, particularly in the Melbourne papers, about “teenagers’ secret world” in which “introspective, lonely, misunderstood and depressed” young people sought solace in the communities of emo and MySpace (Dubecki 3).

Also similar was that the dangers posed by emo formed part of the way this story was reported, particularly with respect to emo’s alleged connection to self-harming practices. The connections between the emo subculture and the girls’ suicides were often vague and non-specific: Gater and Gestier’s MySpace pages were described as “odes to subculture” (Dowsley 73) and their suicides “influenced by youth subcultures” (Dubecki and Oakes 1), but it was not clearly substantiated in the reports that either Gater or Gestier identified with the emo (or any) subculture (see: Dubecki 3).

It was similarly the case that the stories connected the deaths of Gater and Gestier to personal disclosures on MySpace. In contrast to the reporting on Carly Ryan’s murder, however, there were fewer concerns about inappropriate and overly personal disclosures online, and more worries that the teenagers’ online disclosures had been *missed* by both the girls’ friends and by adult authorities. The apparent suicide warning messages left on the girls’ MySpace pages in the months leading up to their deaths, including “it’s over for me, I can’t take it!” and “let Steph and me be free” (qtd. in Oakes 5), were seen as evidence of the inaccessibility of young people’s cries for help in an online environment. Headlines such as “Teen Cries for Help Lost in Cyberspace” (Nolan 4) suggest that the concern in this case was less about the “secrecy” of youth culture, and more about an inability of parents (and other adult authorities) to penetrate online youth culture in order to hear disclosures made.

As a consequence, parents were encouraged to access these disclosures in other ways: Andrea Burns in an opinion column for the *Sunday Herald Sun*, for example, urged parents to open the lines of communication with their teenagers and not “leave the young to suffer in silence” (108). An article in the *Sunday Age*

claimed developmental similarities between toddlers and teenagers necessitated increased parental involvement in the lives of teens (Susan Sawyer qtd. in Egan 12).

Of course, as Livingstone notes, part of the pleasure of social networking sites for young people is the possibility of *escape* from the surveillance of parental authority (396). Young people’s status as a social category “to be watched” (Davis 251), then, becomes challenged by the obvious difficulties of regular parental access to teenagers’ online profiles. Perhaps acknowledging the inherent difficulties of fully “knowing” online youth culture, and in turn seeking to make the Gater/Gestier tragedy more explicable and comprehensible, many of the articles attempted to make sense of the apparently unknowable in terms of the familiar and already-known. In this case, the complexities of Gater and Gestier’s deaths were presented as a response to something far more comprehensible to adult authorities: school bullying.

It is important to note that many of the articles did not follow government recommendations on the reporting of suicide as they often did not consider the teenagers’ deaths in the context of depression or other mental health risks (see: Blood et al. 9). Instead, some reports, such as the Neil McMahon’s story for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, claimed that the girls’ deaths could be linked to bullying—according to one friend Stephanie Gestier was “being bullied really badly” at school (1). Others simply assumed, but did not substantiate, a connection between the deaths of the two teenagers and the experience of bullying.

For instance, in an opinion piece for *The Australian*, Gater and Gestier’s deaths are a segue for discussing teenage bullying more generally: “were Gater and Gestier bullied?” writer Jack Sargeant asks. “I do not know but I imagine they were” (10). Similarly, in an opinion piece for the *Herald Sun* entitled “Why Kids Today Feel so ‘Emo’”, Labor MP Lindsay Tanner begins by questioning the role of the emo subculture in the deaths of Gater and Gestier, but quickly shifts to a broader discussion of bullying. He writes: “Emos sound a lot like kids who typically get bullied and excluded by other kids [...] I’m not really in a position to know, but I can’t help wondering” (Tanner 21).

Like Sargeant, Tanner does not make a conclusive link between emo, MySpace, suicide and bullying, and so instead shifts from a discussion of the specifics of the Gater/Gestier case to a discussion of the broader problems their suicides were seen to be symptomatic of. This was assisted by Tanner’s claims that emo is simply a characteristic of “kids today” rather than as a specific subcultural affiliation. Emo, he argued, “now seems to reflect quite a bit more than just particular music and fashion styles”: it is seen to represent a much wider problem in youth culture (Tanner 21).

Emo thus functioned as a “way in” for critics who perhaps found it easier to (initially) talk about suicide as a risk for those on the cultural fringe, rather than the adolescent mainstream. As a result, the news coverage circled between the risks posed by subcultural involvement and the idea that any or all young people could be at risk of suicide. By conceiving explicit displays of emotionality online as the expression of bullied young people at risk of suicide, otherwise ambiguous disclosures and representations of emotion could be made knowable as young people’s cries for (parental and adult) help.

Conclusion

In the newspaper reporting and commentary on the deaths of Carly Ryan, Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier, young people are thought to disclose both too much and not enough. The “cultural thinking-out-loud” (Hartley 17) that characterised this type of journalism presented young people’s disclosures as putting them

at risk of harm by others, or as revealing that they are at risk of self harm or suicide. At the same time, however, these reports and commentaries also expressed anxieties that young people do not disclose in ways that can be rendered easily knowable, controllable or resolvable by adult authorities. Certainly, the newspaper coverage works to construct and legitimise ideals of parental surveillance of teenagers that speak to the broader discourses of Internet safety that have become prominent in recent years.

What is perhaps more significant about this material, however, is that by constructing young people as a whole as “emotional people” (Vowles 1) in need of intervention, surveillance and supervision, and thereby subsuming the specific concerns about the emo subculture and social networking technologies into an expression of more generalised concerns about the “unknowability” of young people as a whole, the newspaper coverage is, in John Hartley’s words, “almost always about something else” (16). Emo and social networking, then, are not so much classic “folk devils”, but are “ways in” for expressing anxieties that are not always clearly and consistently articulated. In expressing anxieties about the “unknowability” of contemporary youth culture, then, the newspaper coverage ultimately also contributed to it. This highlights both the complexity in which moral panic discourse functions in media reporting, and the ways in which more complete understandings of emo, social networking technologies and youth culture became constrained by discourses that treated them as essentially interchangeable.

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