

the first dashboard confessionals

What can the emo subculture on MySpace reveal about the origins of digital self-curation and how has it inspired identity curation on contemporary social media platforms?



an essay by amelina ballerina

the first dashboard confessionals

In the early 2000s, young people, particularly emos, weren't just wearing their hearts on their sleeves, they were plastering them all over their MySpace profiles.

By hearts, I mean everything. The carefully curated playlists, various blinking GIFs with bold pink fonts and animal prints, X's, underscores, text based emoticons and obsessive dedications to Pete Wentz and Mikey Way or wild speculations about their secret romance...
#Petekey

MySpace provided users with a canvas for self-expression. HTML layouts, GIFs, and top 8 lists weren't just decorations, they were statements about identity. But beyond the aesthetics, something deeper was happening. Within the emo subgenre, users weren't posting for the world, they were curating their digital personas to signal people with shared interests, emotions and style and to ultimately create communities where they could discuss and connect over those interests.





Early MySpace profiles were often messy, overwhelming and fueled by enthusiasm. These spaces, much like the teen pop culture publications of the time, prioritised authentic engagement and personal investment over polished presentation. What made them resonate was their sincerity and ability to balance style, self-expression and genuine interest.

This zine investigates the MySpace era emo subculture to understand how it shaped the early development of digital self-curation. It considers how these profiles influenced the ways online personas are constructed today, and explores how the principles of authenticity and performative expression from this era can inform contemporary creative platforms, fostering genuine engagement and meaningful connections with audiences.

emo history

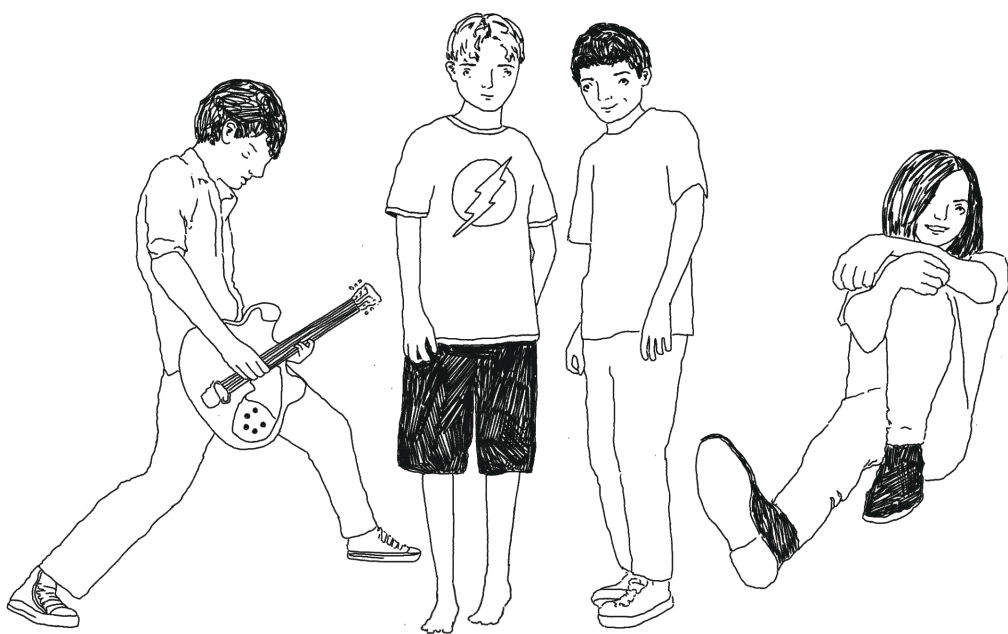
Before emo became the glittery, guyliner-covered subculture we recognise from the early 2000s, it had a completely different life. The earliest version of emo grew out of the Washington D.C. hardcore scene in the mid-1980s, where bands like Rites of Spring, and Minor Threat were taking punk's intensity and turning it inward. Hardcore pushed the boundaries of punk, far past style, convention, and oftentimes, past melody (Greenwald, 2003) but it was also a community built on connection and shared emotion. Emo kept that sense of collective feeling but shifted the focus from political anger to more personal topics like heartbreak, self-doubt and the emotional uncertainty of growing up, experiences that would remain relevant to listeners well beyond their teenage years.

By the 1990s, emo had spread across the U.S and started to sound softer and more melodic. The Midwestern wave of emo softened the D.C. sound, with indie rock and math-rock influences and a greater emphasis on musical dynamics and subtlety. The Kinsella brothers, Mike and Tim of Cap'n Jazz, were central to defining the Midwestern emo sound, with unconventional tunings and time signatures as well as emotionally candid lyrics, creating a style immediately identifiable with this era. Their approach has since inspired a new generation of bands, often grouped under the "emo revival," including Modern Baseball and Mom Jeans, who draw on the melodic complexity and honesty pioneered by the Kinsellas.

But the version of emo that concerns this zine, and the one that shaped digital identity most dramatically, is the early 2000s mainstream wave, often labelled as “mall emo.” This era was defined by bands like My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy and Panic! At The Disco, whose theatrical style and catchy hooks captured a wide audience. Earlier acts such as Jimmy Eat World and Dashboard Confessional aided emo’s rise into the mainstream with radio-friendly melodies, making the genre more accessible to a broader audience. However, MySpace was the platform that transformed the subculture into a cultural phenomenon, amplifying its musical and visual identity.

In the early 2000s, emo’s adopted a bold style that blended punk and goth influences with current trends. Dark or neon colours, slim-fit trousers, side-swept fringes or back-combed hair, and accessories like wristbands and band merchandise, eyeliner, studded belts, tartan skirts, and worn-in Converse all became iconic markers of the subculture. At the same time, bands like Panic! At The Disco with *A Fever You Can’t Sweat Out* and My Chemical Romance with *The Black Parade*, emphasised their own distinct looks, pairing visually striking outfits with storylines and theatrics. Unlike earlier Midwestern emo, which focused primarily on the music, early-2000s emo placed equal emphasis on style and spectacle, making aesthetic presentation just as defining as the sound itself. Appearance and performance became fundamental to the culture for both bands and fans, creating a cultural identity that was instantly recognisable.

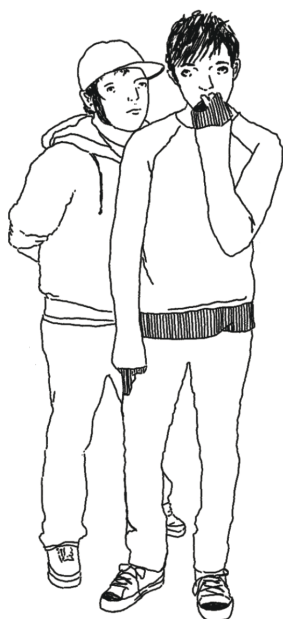
The early 2000s didn’t just bring emo into mainstream pop culture, they brought it online, where it evolved into something increasingly performative and aesthetically driven. This is the emo that defined the MySpace generation and has shaped the way we curate ourselves online today.



Rites of Spring

Cap'n Jazz

Dashboard Confessional



Fall Out Boy



Paramore



Mom Jeans

mySpace

MySpace became synonymous with third wave emo in the early 2000s, offering a digital space where music taste and identity came together in ways that felt entirely new. Launching in 2003, the platform grew rapidly, fuelled by its emphasis on user driven personalisation and its encouragement of direct communication between users, artists, and online communities. In 2006, MySpace became so culturally dominant that it surpassed Google and Yahoo as the most visited website in the United States, and was the largest social networking site globally from 2005 until 2008. (Stewart, 2024) Its influence during this period was enormous, not only because of its popularity, but because it reshaped how young people began to think about themselves online.

The platform particularly resonated with emo teenagers as it allowed them to curate almost every aspect of their profiles, transforming their pages into personalised digital collages that expressed who they were, what they were interested in and who they wanted to connect with. At a time before algorithmic feeds, when posts appeared chronologically and discovery depended on active searching rather than passive recommendation, this level of customisation was crucial, giving users direct control over the content they engaged with and the communities they gravitated toward.

Music profiles were listed separately on MySpace which made the platform especially valuable for the emo community, allowing users to search for bands directly, discover new music through friends' profiles, and even initiate direct contact with their favourite artists. MySpace also emerged at a time when digital spaces still felt experimental and close-knit, offering a kind of creative freedom that made digital identity feel both playful and genuine. Early band websites, like Panic! At The Disco's first 'About Us' page, that linked to a downloadable Microsoft Word Document, illustrate how bands and fans alike were improvising their online identities without the strategic branding that would later define social media.

Emo fans on MySpace became central to defining the culture of the time, using their profiles to build community and visually signal their place within the scene. In doing so, they helped to establish an early model of digital self-curation, by assembling profiles that were simultaneously sincere and strategic, designed to express their genuine interests while also appealing to a specific audience.

Although MySpace declined in popularity in the 2010s due to platforms like Facebook and Tumblr, the framework of creating a considered online persona has evolved beyond its origins and has since become a defining feature of modern digital culture.

Digital self

Now that the groundwork of emo history and the rise of MySpace has been established, we can look more closely at the origins of digital self-curation and how the emo subculture shaped the way users build their identities on contemporary social media platforms.

Emo MySpace users showed that online identity could be both expressive and constructed, that emotional honesty could sit comfortably alongside stylistic strategy. Even when users were posting authentically, updating their pages with day-to-day life, they made intentional aesthetic choices designed to resonate with others in the scene.

Their digital aesthetics often overlapped with the broader visual language of “mall emo”, making it easy to identify people “in your circle.” MySpace became a space where offline markers of belonging like styling choices, band merch and makeup were translated into digital form. Low-resolution mirror selfies, high-contrast filters, sparkly borders and compressed JPEGs all contributed to an instantly recognisable emo visual code. It’s likely that MySpace also intensified the significance of style during this era, since visual cues became essential for identifying who genuinely belonged to the community.

curation

While there was plenty of discourse around authenticity on MySpace, and even research highlighting gendered inequalities within the emo scene, where female users were often treated as inauthentic or “posers” (Manago 2008) it’s still clear that participation often took the form of performance. Posting was a way to demonstrate the depth of your investment, to submerge yourself fully in an identity that signalled sincerity. Authenticity was expressed through recognizable tropes, combining emotional vulnerability with aesthetic hyper-awareness. This combination makes emo MySpace profiles central to understanding the early development of digital self-curation.

In contemporary social media environments driven by algorithms, it’s especially important to recognise these origins. Platforms now push users toward communities and creators they are predicted to enjoy, which means identity is shaped as much by unseen recommendation systems as by personal interest. The mainstream visual culture of today is more polished and controlled but subcultures still thrive through fan pages, Discord servers, and accounts that continue to use, consciously or not, the self-curation principles pioneered by emo MySpace users.

conclusion

The line between authenticity and performance is more blurry than ever on contemporary platforms. But at least on MySpace, they coexisted with purpose as users were fuelled by genuine curiosity and a desire for community, not attention or monetisation. Posting screenshots of your favourite band or updates on their lives still acts as a digital signal of interest, arguably more authentically than any perfectly filtered selfie. Meanwhile, content creators often adopt diluted versions of alternative aesthetics to maximise reach, a move that speaks more to strategy than sincerity.

The emo subculture's approach to digital self-curation has become the blueprint for much of what we now take for granted online and although algorithms have reshaped these practices, it's worth asking how we use our profiles today.

Even though I never used MySpace directly, the emo communities it fostered have shaped my own approach to digital self-curation on platforms like Instagram.

As a former fan-account kid, I still I still get excited on the rare occasion that Ryan Ross posts on Instagram and maybe I still find comfort in the idea of rewatching Dan and Phil videos.

More than anything, I'm inspired by the framework of those old MySpace profiles, for their sincerity and their enthusiasm but mainly for their refusal to separate identity from genuine interest. I'd rather post content that feels rooted in what I actually care about, even if it's stylistically curated or a little posed, than contribute to the hollow, aesthetic collages that dominate so much of contemporary visual culture.

So, next time you post something online ask yourself:
Is this really you, or is it just *The Ghost of You*?

the first dashboard
Confessionals

@amelinaballerinaillustration