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## 1990s Grunge and its Effect on Adolescents

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## **1990s Grunge and its Effect on Adolescents**

The 1990s grunge scene was an extremely influential music movement. Grunge music made its way from being an underground movement to the mainstream media and was very popular among adolescents in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Grunge created a huge social impact in everything from fashion and movies, to literature and politics. The outspoken musicians became advocates for equality and human rights “through their music and emotional, introspective lyrics wrapped up in aggression” (Korać, 2014). This essay will define what grunge is, and will discuss the formation and the fall of grunge. It will also investigate how grunge has influenced society, and how grunge has affected adolescent identity formation through promoting the healthy release of negative emotions.

### **Grunge and its Formation**

An amalgamation of many other genres of music, grunge pulls mostly from punk rock, heavy metal, and other similar genres. Korać (2014) establishes in “The Contribution of Grunge to Social Change” that grunge is a variety of punk and that heavy metal, with lyrics that “are angst-filled, comprising themes of alienation, apathy and desire for freedom from established norms.” Korać states, “Another important thing expressed in lyrics is ideology which opposes mainstream.” This ideology included a refusal of all things mainstream, and emphasis on the importance of remaining original, underground, and real. Korać notes that a key difference between metal and grunge was the content of their songs. Metal bands tend to write about “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll”, the devil, demons, and the apocalypse, while grunge bands focus on “negative feelings in general, like failure, boredom, [and] loneliness.” The topics that Grunge bands focus on are highly relatable to teenagers and adolescents, which is one of the major reasons why Grunge became so popular within that group.

Grunge was created in Seattle, Washington in the late 1980s and it peaked in the mid 1990s. According to Korać (2014), grunge is a musical genre which “is a fusion of many different styles”. The article *Nevermind: The Emergence and Downturn of Grunge Rock from the Mid 1980s to 1990s* defines grunge as “an alternative musical category...known for its distorted guitar sounds, powerful vocals, and uneasy lyrics” (Nevermind, n.d.). While grunge started as a niche movement, the commercial success it gained was in direct contrast with the heart and soul of the grunge movement, characterized by “being un-fashion, and expressing some of the unfavorable realities of life” (Nevermind, n.d.). After Sub Pop, a new record label, signed Soundgarden, Mudhoney, and Nirvana, grunge began to expand and move toward mainstream media. Sub Pop was the catalyst that really shot Grunge into the mainstream, exposing it to the outside world. According to Korać (2014), despite the wild popularity of grunge in the mainstream, “many felt that it was only a fad created by the media.” This feeling changed drastically when Nirvana released their second record *Nevermind* along with its first single *Smells Like Teen Spirit* which became “an anti-anthem for all those discontented with their lives” (Korać, 2014). *Nevermind* exploded, launching grunge into global fame.

### **Adolescent Rebellion**

According to Pickhardt (2009), there are two common types of adolescent rebellion. The first is rebellion “against fitting in socially (rebellion of non-conformity),” with the other being rebellion “against adult authority (rebellion of non-compliance).” Rebellion also has “different roles in a young person’s growth depending in what stage of adolescence it is expressed” (Pickhardt, 2009). As adolescents change emotionally, so do their needs and their methods of rebellion. Pickhardt states that “in mid adolescence..., most rebellion is about creating needed differentiation to experiment with identity and needed opposition to gather power of self-

determination” (Pickhardt, 2009). To form their own identity, adolescents commit acts of rebellion in the search for themselves. Pickhardt recommends that parents and authority figures “let the consequences of the young person’s resistant choices play out and not interfere” because consequences are a part of learning and identity formation for the transition into adulthood. Rebellion is a reflection of mood and at a time where adolescents are full of angst and apathy, most turn to music.

Many studies have shown that there is a correlation between music and mood. McCraty et al. (1998) examined several genres of music, but most importantly for this paper, it studied “Grunge Rock.” The study had two hypotheses about grunge music. They hypothesized that “grunge rock will heighten negative feelings”, and that “teenagers will be less positively affected by classical music and less negatively affected by grunge rock music than will adults” (McCraty et al., 1998). They found that “following the grunge rock music, there were significant increases in hostility, fatigue, sadness, and tension” and “significant reductions in caring, relaxation, mental clarity, and vigor.” When broken into two subgroups of teenagers and adults, they found that the second grunge rock hypothesis was only partially supported, with both adults and teenagers being negatively affected by grunge music. While these negative effects may seem bad, for teenagers, they are vital. Music provides an outlet for aggression. Grunge allowed adolescents to experience a cathartic purging of emotion in a healthy way. In addition to this catharsis, grunge gave adolescents a movement to stand behind. It was a way to rally like-minded people through music. Adolescents learned that they didn’t have to blindly accept what the older generations told them, and through that, they promoted social change.

## **Social Influence**

The Grunge movement was about much more than just the music. It became an identity. Grunge influenced fashion, movies, literature, and even politics. Grunge, which made a point of dressing down out of necessity, wearing flannels, torn jeans, and thrifted clothes, became a fashion movement. Brands like Marc Jacobs, Anna Sui, and Christian Francis Roth began presenting these styles as high fashion (Korać, 2014). As mentioned in Korać's essay, a reader of *Vogue* sent in a letter stating,

If the whole idea is to dress down, why picture models in \$400 dresses? No one who can honestly relate to the music labeled grunge is going to pay \$1,400 for a cashmere sweater [,] especially when they can buy a perfectly comfortable flannel shirt for 50 cents at the local thrift store.

Yet still, grunge found its way into the mainstream. Grunge inspired movies and documentaries, several of which followed the life and death of Kurt Cobain. Many bands were involved in fighting for social and political change. Korać (2014) states that “bands used their reputation to support and promote their beliefs, hoping that the influence of music can direct the people towards independence.” A huge example of this influence is Pearl Jam who fought strongly for the pro-choice movement as well as encouraged adolescents to vote and participate in politics (Korać, 2014). Pearl Jam has also helped spread awareness of Crohn's disease, has played at several benefit concerts, and promotes environmental sustainability (Korać, 2014). Pearl Jam consistently uses their platform to evoke change by spreading awareness and by fighting for what they believe.

## **Conclusion**

Grunge began to decline in the late 1990s with many of the bands who popularized it disappearing. Kurt Cobain's 1994 suicide was seen as the end of grunge for many fans (Korać, 2014). Pearl Jam stopped performing as a boycott of Ticketmaster for overcharging fans for

tickets, which lasted three years. Other bands soon stopped playing or suffered from the unexpected deaths of band members. In the end, grunge had become the very thing it sought to rebel against as it became mainstream and commercialized. Even though it was a short-lived movement, Grunge provided a much-needed outlet for adolescents to express themselves in a healthy way. Despite the eventual fall of grunge's popularity, today millions of people continue to listen to grunge, and it is just as influential to adolescents now as it was back then.

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