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Metal and Sexism

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Biography

Rosemary Lucy Hill is a Lecturer in Sociology at University of Leeds and Treasurer of IASPM UK & Ireland. She researches gender, popular music and data visualisations. She has published on the metal media, the moral panic around emo, subcultural theory and the conventions of data visualisations. Her book *Gender, Metal and the Media: Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music* (Palgrave, 2016) examines women's experiences as metal fans. Current interests centre around feminism and metal, and the use of data in feminist media activism. She has appeared on BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed on the subject of women fans, metal and subcultures. She is also lead singer of Galacticat and has previously fronted Bouvier and Fake Tan.

Abstract

The broad genre of hard rock and metal is often depicted, both in media portrayals and academic accounts, as particularly sexist, its male dominance and hypermasculinity alienating for women. In

this article I draw on my research, which aims to understand women's experiences as fans of the genre within the context of assumptions of sexism. I interviewed British women who were fans of bands across the broad genre of hard rock and metal. Here I pay particular attention to women's experiences at hard rock and metal events and their encounters with sexism. My participants depicted hard rock and metal as *less* sexist than a generalised 'mainstream'. I argue that the contradiction between academic accounts and fan accounts of sexism is due to the subtle ways in which sexism manifests and also down to a mythical sense of 'equality' that exists within metal culture. However, I posit that, in accordance with feminist methodological work, it is vital to take women's words seriously and to acknowledge the broader significance of metal in their everyday lives. This means that we must contemplate that, in distinction to some academic accounts, metal might actually be a culture that is relatively free from sexism.

Keywords

Fans, feminist methodology, heavy metal, sexism, women

Introduction

Heavy metal has historically faced allegations of sexism from the media (Weinstein 2000 [1991], Kelly 2014) and from academics (e.g. Vasan 2011, Kahn-Harris 2007). These controversial claims have resulted in much debate in the metal media, shaped by a multitude of different perspectives on what counts as sexism and whether feminism is justified. Academics are broadly in agreement that sexism exists in metal, across subgenres and national contexts (although to differing degrees). However, this argument has come to be positioned as the *only* academic viewpoint on metal and gender by those who would characterise metal scholars as Social Justice Warriors. Research on

metal and gender is much more sophisticated and multi-faceted, as recent work by Amber Clifford-Napoleone (2015), Gabrielle Riches (2015) and the edited collection of papers from the 2009 Cologne conference (Heesch and Scott 2016) attest. However, in spite of this sophisticated research on metal and gender, the question ‘How sexist is hard rock and metal?’ remains pertinent. Fan accounts of their experiences at metal events – both from women and men fans – are at odds with academic accounts such as Vasan’s (2010), which demonstrates incomprehension at why women would enjoy such sexist music and culture (Savigny and Sleight 2015).

Drawing on my interviews with British women fans, this article interrogates the mismatch between fans’ claims that metal is not so sexist and academic arguments that maintain that it is. I argue that three factors play a part in understanding fan accounts of sexism: (1) difficulties in identifying sexism, which I discuss with reference to feminist research on women and work; (2) the mythical sense of ‘equality’ that exists within metal culture, which suppresses feminist discourses; and (3) that it is vital to listen to what women say about sexism within the context of their experiences in the broader patriarchal society. I turn first to feminists’ definitions of sexism and to discussions of sexism within the metal context. I then outline my methodology before moving to examine three key aspects of women fans’ discussions of their experiences of sexism: the difficulty in identifying sexism due to its subtlety and to postfeminist discourse; the obfuscating power of the myth of equality; and the relatively few sexist incidents when compared to experiences at mainstream events. I conclude by highlighting that metal is not without sexism – after all it is part of sexist society – and arguing that active pursuit of anti-sexist practices is necessary.

Defining sexism

Sexism has not been well defined in academic literature (Powell and Sang 2015, Valentine et al. 2014), leaving in place tacit assumptions of what sexism is and what it means for women and men.

Sexism can be defined as the differential treatment of women and men depending on their perceived inclusion of one group or the other (women or men). It is usually used to describe practices that discriminate against women in negative ways, although it is sometimes used to describe negative treatment of men as men (e.g. when considering the UK's poor paternity leave entitlement). Typically, then, 'sexism' is used to refer to treatment of women by men that results in the reproduction of social inequalities. However, sexism is not only perpetrated by men and nor are women the only sufferers of it: sexist discourses can be deployed in complex ways. Sexism does not always appear to work in negative ways, but it still has negative consequences. Becker and Swim discuss benevolent sexism (e.g. the idealisation of women as caregivers and the belief that women need to be protected by men) as based on beliefs that women are 'weak and incompetent' (Becker and Swim 2011, p. 228). Benevolent sexism is a problem because it causes women to feel more satisfied with the status quo, thus enabling other forms of sexist discrimination to be justified. Women remain significantly disadvantaged in modern societies as a result of discrimination based on their perceived sex. Gill (2011) and Mills (2003) argue that sexism takes subtle, flexible and indirect forms; furthermore, in everyday social interactions the weight of sexist remarks and actions are so frequent as to be normalised (Bates 2016). Such everyday sexism's impact on women's lives by reducing us to our sex, dehumanising us, removing our agency and limiting our opportunities – but we are not always able to identify these practices as sexist because sexism is so normalised and subtle.

With Delphy (1993), I see assertions of difference as a key factor in the oppression and subordination of people grouped as 'women'. For the purposes of this article, therefore, I designate as sexist those everyday practices which are founded on an assumption of essential difference between men and women where (a) it serves to position women as a unitary and uniform group, and (b) it contributes to the marginalisation, objectification or other denial of rights of the individual.

This might involve, for instance, being excluded from conversation or activities; being discussed or addressed as primarily a sexual object, especially in degrading terms; being assaulted or harassed. This is a working definition. It necessarily takes in overt sexism, subtle sexism and benevolent sexism in order to draw a picture of the complexity of women's continuing secondary status in the UK in the 21st century. When it comes to hard rock and metal, sexism, and allegations of it, have been a constant presence in its nearly 50-year existence (Rat 2013 [1970], Frith and McRobbie 1990 [1978], Baumgardner 2005).

Sexism and heavy metal

Historical allegations against metal of sexism, violence and perversion are an important part of how metal fans understand the genre and the culture. In 1980s USA, the mostly conservative Christian organisations the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) and the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) were deeply concerned that the music and music videos enjoyed by young white men were damaging due to sexist and violent language and imagery. Feminist ideas about the problem of violence against women were important in shaping these allegations. It could be argued that feminist discourse was being appropriated by a moralist right, but on the other hand, did the PMRC have a point? Weinstein (2000 [1991]) investigated the charges that metal induces suicide, aggression, sexual perversion and Satanism, and, with a large dose of ridicule, shows them to be lacking in understanding of lyrical irony. She does not, however, give the charges of misogyny the same space. She asserts that the genre is masculinist, chauvinistic and misogynistic, but argues that this is alleviated by the 'sense of community' (Weinstein 2000 [1991], 105). As long as women are prepared to downplay femininity and go by the masculine rules there is no problem: sexism is only faced by those who are feminine. In this way the PMRC/PTA charges are disregarded and seemingly unproblematic.

Yet an array of researchers have described the sexism that women face as they participate in hard rock and metal culture. 1990s psychology research responds to the PMRC and PTA panic, and finds metal to be unequivocally sexist. St Lawrence and Joyner (1991) find that listening to heavy metal corresponds to 'higher levels of sex-role stereotyping and negative attitudes towards women' (Rubin et al. 2001, 29). Hansen and Hansen (1991) conclude that heavy metal fans are more likely to be 'sexist, and higher in machismo' (Rubin et al. 2001, 30). Rubin, West and Mitchell corroborate earlier findings, stating that '[h]eavy metal listeners [...] exhibited more negative attitudes toward women than listeners of other music genres' (Rubin et al. 2001, 35). These results indicate that there is a relationship between preference for hard rock and metal music and sexist attitudes, but do not tell us anything about women fans' experiences of sexism.

More recent work in media and cultural studies and the social sciences confirms metal's sexism, but typically through speaking to women about their experiences and examining hard rock and metal texts rather than assessing male fans' attitudes. This work has found sexism that ranges through sexist attitudes and behaviours of peers at hard rock and metal events (Krenske and McKay 2000, Kahn-Harris 2007, Vasan 2011); symbolic violence, such as the violently misogynistic imagery in artwork and lyrics (Kahn-Harris 2007, Overell 2010, Vasan 2010, Barron 2013); women being faced with a barrage of questions to prove the authenticity of their fandom (Nordström and Herz 2013); the dominance of men in bands and prejudice faced by women musicians (Bayton 1998, Shadrack 2014, Spracklen 2015); and women fans being represented in the media as groupies, more interested in the musician than the music (Hill 2016), a prejudice which underpins differential treatment like that discussed by Nordström and Herz. These studies assert that metal has a sexism problem.

Methodology

My doctoral research investigated the experiences of women hard rock and metal fans. The research was feminist in approach, placing high value on the experiences of women. I examined the representation of women fans via semiotic analysis of *Kerrang!* magazine and I conducted interviews with women fans. Here I primarily draw on the interview data. I interviewed 19 white women living in Britain, aged between 16 and 69, although mostly in their late 20s/early 30s, who liked a variety of hard rock and metal bands. Participants were found via snowballing and via a request for participants on a university intranet. As a result 15 interviewees lived in the North of England and four lived in the South. The majority asserted a class identity that was either working or middle class or a combination thereof. All of the women were white and all but one British. Interviews were semi-structured. I asked them about the music they loved, about their experiences of sexism in the metal community, and about family and friendships.

In analysing the interviews I treated the women's experiences as articulated perceptions: in relating things that had happened, the incidents and impressions of the incidents were given form and signification through their utterance. The experiences were mediated by memory, emotions, later incidents and the context of the telling. They may also use 'fictive devices' (Stanley 1992, 62) and imaginative accounts: fictions that draw on their experiences and their knowledge about hard rock and metal bands and culture. The use of fictive devices and imagination in reconstructing events and experiences 'does not mean that the past and its mythologies are not "real"' (Stanley 1992, 86). The way in which the selves are imagined and the experiences put together is a real process, and the experiences the women related, re-thought, reconstructed and re-imagined have real meaning in the world. Names have been changed.

Subtle sexism

One of the most immediate and recognisable markers of sexism is sexual harassment. The majority of the women I spoke to did not describe experiences of sexual harassment. Seven of my interviewees said that they had never encountered sexual harassment at hard rock and metal events, but there were three examples. Two, Jenny and Sally, both in their mid-30s, were somewhat reluctant to tell me about their experiences and classified them as 'fun' rather than harassment. Here's Jenny talking about her recent experience buying music at a gig. Records and t-shirts are often sold at concerts, with the merchandise table often staffed by friends of the band:

[Interviewer] Have you ever encountered any sorts of problems going to gigs and buying records and t-shirts and you think, 'Oh I wouldn't have this problem if I was a man'?

[Jenny] [Pause] You might get a few funny comments.

[Interviewer] What kind of comments?

[Jenny] Well the other day it was '£3 or you have to show us your tits' and I was like [shaming] 'Really?' and they were like [shamed] 'No we don't really mean that sorry. Let you off that'. That was funny.

[Interviewer] So that was on the way into a gig?

[Jenny] No, no buying the EP later. They were being cheeky cos apparently the band had written it on the sleeve so they were like 'Oh apparently we have to ask you this' [laughs].

That's quite funny. I mean no no not at all.

Jenny portrays the young salesmen as jokers who do not pose a threat: this is not, for her, serious harassment; in fact she denies that this is a problem of sexism with her 'No no not at all'. However, the incident shows how the objectification of women is mobilised as part of the normal culture of metal. This resembles the argument that verbal harassment is nothing more than ironic, harmless

'banter', although, as Mooney (2008) contends, the 'banter' argument has a silencing effect that prevents sexism from being challenged. However, Jenny did not interpret being asked to show her breasts as problematic sexism, even as she scorned the young men. Similarly, Sally argued that being shouted at to 'get her tits out' at festivals was 'jokey' rather than threatening. Her response suggests that her identity within hard rock and metal culture was as one of the boys, able to share in the jokes. Sally also told me that she had not noticed how male-dominated the genre is, particularly in terms of musicians, until we arranged the interview. At this point she thought, 'It is all guys, it never crossed my mind' (Sally). This denotes that for some fans metal's masculine culture is viewed as normal and unproblematic. The underlying problems of who gets to perform metal music, and the broader context of the barriers facing women in becoming musicians in popular music (Green 1997) are therefore unseen.

That sexual harassment was one of the primary forms of sexism that my interviewees discussed, suggests that these more publicised sexism's eclipse other forms, which are not acknowledged as prejudice. Some frustrations at hard rock and metal concerts, for instance when women found themselves stood behind a tall man, were not interpreted as sexism's, although they are produced by patriarchal power relations. The difficulty of seeing the band at concerts, due to the relative taller height of men, resulted in the necessity of standing at the back or around the sides in order to get a decent line of sight and also to avoid being bumped or barged by more exuberant fans. For Jeanette, who was in her mid-30s, entering the moshpit was a hazard:

[Jeanette] If you choose to go in then people bump into each other, they push each other, if they fall over they laugh at each other, but that's all part of it and whoever's chosen to go in there should be treated equally in my opinion. It's not something I do.

[Interviewer] You don't choose to go in there?

[Jeanette] I don't, I don't go in at all, no.

[Interviewer] Is it because of the...

[Jeanette] I don't like to be bumped [laughs] don't like to be bumped!

Typically, the exuberant fans moshing will be young men. The pit is not exclusively used by men, but it is so demarcated that when women do mosh this is characterised as transgressive (Riches et al. 2014). The use of space is gendered, but Jeanette's account does not acknowledge this. Young men's privilege and (especially older) women's marginalisation – her own – was accepted as natural and therefore normalised. Practical, personal reasons are given, rather than an interpretation of sexism, similar to what Valentine, Jackson and Mayblin (2014) saw happening in the fire station. In the male-dominated fire station, sexism is so normal and can be so subtle that it is not interpreted as such. Valentine et al. argue that women firefighters are 'less willing or able to identify' (2014, 407) sexism, and negative incidents were therefore interpreted as being due to women's 'own personal shortcomings' (2014, 407). For women metal fans who are unable to see the stage, 'personal shortcomings' are a very material way in which sexism impinges on their participation. In their discussion of women in the architecture, engineering and construction industries, Powell and Sang (2015) argue that some women describe their experiences of sexism as the result of biological differences between men and women, and therefore *justified*. They name this naturalisation of difference as 'misrecognition': sexist social situations are accounted for by the argument of essential differences between women and men. In Jeanette's depiction, men's tallness and greater exuberance were naturalised; this position could therefore be read as misrecognition.

Jeanette's summing up of the pit is that moshing is a matter of personal choice. This resonates with Savigny and Sleight's (2015) argument that the postfeminist discourse of empowerment is used to explain choices that result in the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo. That the best viewpoint of the stage remains the preserve of younger men is argued by Jeanette to be a matter of choice, not a tactic to ensure male privilege. The individual choice line sounds like an empowered argument

in which women can make their lives as they wish. However, as Budgeon (2015) argues, the empowered choice argument does nothing to change the conditions in which the distinctly gendered – sexist – use of space is created.

Naming Jeanette's situation as a misrecognition of sexism, or an unreflective use of postfeminist discourse is problematic, as neither take into account the very real sense of wanting to physically protect herself. It is easy to judge others' decisions as wanting – why do women hard rock and metal fans not enter the space in front of the stage? – but Jeanette and other of my interviewees who made similar comments are in a position of fear for their bodily integrity. Hegemony over spaces at the metal gig therefore relies on women's fear. Riches (2015) argues that the moshpit and its permission for aggression can be a site in which women can break barriers of permitted feminine behaviour; however, this is only the case for women who *choose* to participate. That choice is guided by a number of factors, including age gender and dis/ability. Women must steel themselves to enter the pit, which remains a male terrain, even if it does allow space for transgressing expectations of feminine behaviour. In the 1990s the riot grrrls, a group of feminist punk musicians who carved out their own musical sphere, organised for a reordering of the space at their concerts which directed women to the front and enabled women to attend concerts alone, safely (Downes 2012). The measures they employed were designed to enable women's participation in music, to break down the star/audience division and had the specifically feminist aim of valuing the female audience as well as facilitating easy movement between roles as audience and roles as musician, i.e. it was designed to show women that they could not only be at the front of the stage, but they could be *on* it too. This reordering of the audience is a striking contrast to the way in which space is used at metal concerts and highlights that male privilege is at the fore in its ordering.

Myth of equality and feminist discourse

My research with *Kerrang!*'s letters pages (Hill 2014) shows that equality is a highly valued concept for metal fans. The letters frequently assert that the community is equal and not subject to the major societal faultlines that affect mainstream society (sex/race/disability/age). The letters show how the community is imagined to prioritise the value that the music you love is most important so that 'rock fan' is the central category of sameness. In *Kerrang!*'s letters pages, equality is articulated as something which *ought* to be accorded to all metal fans, but rarely do the letters specify how it is to be enacted. Implicitly, equality can be understood as a requirement to treat all involved with metal with the same respect because they love metal, and as a mark of distinction from wider society and thereby not featuring the same areas of discrimination. This is how the community is *imagined*, but as plenty of metal researchers have shown, that equality is a myth. Nevertheless, the myth functions as a powerful discourse that naturalises a sense of metal culture as a site in which sexism does not happen.

This ideal of equality came through in a number of the interviews. For Sally, who had not thought about the genre's male dominance before I asked her to be interviewed, the genre's notional equality was an important component:

[Interviewer] Do you feel like your male friends treat you differently to other people [or] other female friends of theirs?

[Sally] Erm I don't think so [...] no I think it's just like as I said before that you share something that you're passionate about so you know you've got something in common.

However, when a bit later on she reflected more on her relationships with male metal fans she highlighted that in fact there *was* a difference in the way they treated her (and notably that the difference was positive and in marked contrast to her treatment by non-metal friends):

I find them very sensitive and very considerate towards women and very protective of them. Er it's kind of the friends that are into heavy metal that won't let women walk on the outside of the path and things like that, and always insist on you know, being on the outside and things like that and you know you don't get that from many [...] males no. Yeah no they're almost more chivalrous really. (Sally)

Sally appreciated the preferential treatment that she received and tellingly did not identify it as being treated differently. However, the chivalry she identified would fall under the category of 'benevolent sexism' (Becker and Swim 2011), i.e. it is born of notions of women's vulnerability and essentialist ideas about women as mothers and in need of protection. Here the myth of equality interacts with subtle sexism to hide the differential treatment that Sally received.

The myth of equality depends on a sense of metal as different to others groups. My participants' discussions of sexual harassment were framed in comparison to experiences of sexual harassment at non-metal events and thus created a sense of an in-group and an out-group. Phipps and Young (2015) argue that sexual harassment is a normalised part of the night-time economy in Britain. The young women students they interviewed described rapes, groping and other unwanted sexual attention from drunken men and feelings of powerlessness to stop it. Metal concerts and clubs are part of the social night-time economy, therefore it could reasonably be expected that such events are scenes of harassment. However, my interviewees felt this was not the case and few spoke about experiencing sexism at metal events. Aowyn, a university women's officer in her very early 20s, offered an explanation:

People aren't really that interested in your body or they're interested for who you are whereas a lot of the time when I've been to places like, you know, like Revolution or I Love

Vodka and places like that it's, you tend to get a lot more harassment because people are there to like pick up girls. (Aowyn)

For Aowyn a characteristic of going to metal clubs was a lack of sexual objectification: harassment *could not* take place due to the philosophy of male participants. Furthermore, a number of the women argued that, when at hard rock and metal events, the focus on the music was the reason that men did not generally subject women to sexual harassment or to unwanted advances:

Honestly the men are there for the music, they're not there to pick up women and, erm, and it's all business. At a metal gig it's all business. (Jeanette)

This fits in with the myth of equality, which presents love of the music as the most important thing in metal fandom thereby pushing sex (and sexism) into a back seat, enabling women to love the music in peace, free from harassment.

Of course, ideas about equality do not mean that metal culture *is* equal; it could be that the notional inequality obscures people's ability to identify incidents of inequality as structural. Or it could be that the myth is so strong that any challenges place the challenger outside the group, as Vasan (2016) convincingly argues. Vasan determines that even if more women are entering metal and have prestige, this does not translate into power. The group behaviour means women cannot contest sexism without risking their place in the group, which is already tenuous. Tolerating sexist attitudes is therefore a necessary strategy for enjoying participating in metal (Vasan 2011). Women's position as a minority group within hard rock and metal is therefore an important consideration in understanding the difference between academic and fan accounts of sexism. Mills (2003) describes the complex negotiating work that women do in deciding whether something is sexist. She argues that women need to think about the person who has made the potentially sexist remark/act and measure it against both their 'hypothesized feminist community' (Mills 2003, 93) and also against

the potential way in which any response might be received. She argues that an accusation of sexism could well be detrimental to relations with the sexist person. In this context, that could mean that the women I spoke to were unwilling to name sexism due to the risk of alienating other hard rock and metal fans. Although my interviewees were happy to talk to me, they may have been reluctant to do anything other than give a glowing portrayal; the reticence of Jenny and Sally to describe their experiences as anything other than jokes may be down to this.

Problematic ideologies of equality exist in other music cultures too (Brill 2008, Thornton 1995). In her study of Goth culture, Brill explores the genre's emphasis on gender transgressions. She argues that an ideology of genderlessness theoretically enables all Goths to perform as much masculinity or femininity as they like. However, the ideology privileges men's ability to perform aspects of femininity whilst simultaneously muting women's ability to perform masculinity. In fact it ends up putting pressure on women to be even more feminine than Goth men. In Goth, as in broader society, genderlessness is therefore a privilege that only men can really enjoy. At the same time it limits the ability to speak up about sexism, for example objectifying images of women are labelled as 'erotica' – expressly so because this is a genderless realm – rather than as objectifying pornography. Genderlessness in Goth is therefore nothing of the sort. Whilst in Goth the ideology of genderlessness allows men to transgress masculinity and perform femininity, in hard rock and metal the myth of equality puts masculinity first.

Because myth works to naturalise an idea, as if it is universally correct and accepted, little room remains for thinking about other perspectives or that things could be another way. Fetterley (1978) argues that in our engagements with culture, dissent is difficult to put into words and thoughts. Feminism therefore plays a crucial role in helping people to make sense of their gendered experiences. It provides the conceptual tools and language with which to express opposition to a

sexism. Because metal culture is not an expressly feminist culture, ways to identify and challenge sexism are not so easy to grasp.

Taking women seriously

If what fans say and what academics say are at odds, then we need to rethink the way in which research is being conducted and interpreted in order to paint a picture of society that women fans will recognise (Smith 2008 [1974]). Whilst as metal scholars we may not view ourselves as occupying a very privileged position (institutional support and funding sources are often lacking), our work has the stamp of authority through its academic production. Feminist social scientists have long argued that listening to how interviewees theorise about their lives from their own experiences is a valuable source of knowledge. It is politically important to do so, especially where it alerts us to misrepresentations in dominant knowledges, but it also enables a broader understanding of our lives, especially in relation to non-hegemonic 'constructions of the social world' (Scott 2008, 273). Although in using 'experience' there is a risk of collapsing women into a unified category which elides differences between women, yet it remains an important concept with which to assess universalised theory (Stanley and Wise 1993). Of primary concern to me, therefore, is to listen to women's accounts and to take them seriously. Questions about the value of thinking through the broader context of women's lives in sexist society need to be asked. What other factors that are not specifically about metal are in play? How are my interviewees' assertions of metal as a less sexist space to be interpreted? What factors may impact on their assessments? Whilst I have already considered some of the literature about how sexism is interpreted, these academic accounts risk reinscribing a divide between academic feminism and women's everyday lives and experiences. They risk a subtle accusation of 'false consciousness' being thrown at women fans, which positions academic feminists as having a greater grasp on truths in the world. And yet, many of the academic

feminists writing about metal are also fans. In fact, my own experiences tally with those of my interviewees.

One of the key things that women said to me was that they were more likely to face sexism, particularly sexual harassment, when at events that played more 'mainstream' music. Thornton (1995) argues that 'mainstream' falls into an oppositional relationship with 'subculture', a divide that is also gendered with 'mainstream' being aligned with 'femininity'. Whilst I approach my interviewees' use of this divide with caution therefore, it nevertheless suggests that women's experiences outside metal play a significant part in shaping their understanding of sexism. Indeed, many of the women used the mainstream as their benchmark against which to measure their experiences of sexism, that is, they thought about their metal experiences in the broader contexts of their lives. As Karen articulated:

That's the other good thing about rock clubs is you can just get up and dance on your own and no-one gives a shite, whereas in like a more trendy club if you're sat on your own, on your own, you got millions of blokes sidling up to you and it's like 'go away'. (Karen)

Karen found that rock clubs (she had been talking about a particular Goth and industrial club) were spaces in which she was free to enjoy listening to music and dancing without being approached by unwanted sexual advances. Her overstatement of 'millions of blokes' and the suggestion of creepiness in 'sidling' implies a strong distaste for such approaches, more typical, in her view of 'trendy' clubs. What Karen wanted was to enjoy herself as a music fan without needing to deter approaches which may, as Ruby's quote below hints, turn into harassment.

Seven of my interviewees said that they had never encountered sexual harassment at hard rock and metal events; five women described hard rock and metal clubs as places where they were less likely to experience sexual harassment or be sexually objectified than at mainstream venues, and four of

these women accompanied their assertions with specific instances. For example, Ruby, a lifelong metal fan in her mid-30s, described an incident in a mainstream club in order to emphasise her point about metal events being safer:

Really really actually had to ask a bouncer to throw one of them out once because they were trying to touch us up, physically touch us up. And I've *never* experienced anything like that in, you know, in my experience of the metal scene when I was younger or at Download as, as even being older sort of thing. So not in my experience. (Ruby)

Many participants used this idea of the mainstream to make their points about metal as a safer space; used in generalised terms, the mainstream was set up as a site of sexism and metal defined against it as *not sexist*. Whilst this echoes my argument that the myth of equality is an important factor influencing women's ability to identify sexism, evidence from the NUS report (National Union of Students et al. 2012) into lad culture corroborates the idea that mainstream events are more sexist. The report found that some young women would attend alternative clubs rather than more mainstream ones, for the reason that they were less likely to be attended by university sports teams, who are argued to be major contributors to 'lad culture'.

My interviewees' references to the mainstream show that identifiable sexism is prevalent in British society; it is significant to acknowledge that in my interviewees' experiences less sexism is felt in metal spaces. In reflecting on their experiences, what my interviewees did, then, was something that most researchers on gender and metal do not do: they took into account their non-metal experiences. Everyday sexism is the background noise for *all* their experiences. Patterson (2016) highlights that all metal experiences take place within the wider society which forms part of that experience. Therefore, since hard rock and metal exists within sexist society it must be assumed that sexism will appear here as well as in the parent culture. Therefore, examining metal and gender and

finding examples of sexism should come as no surprise. What is surprising, however, given metal's hypermasculinity, is that the experiences of sexism are felt by British women as actually fewer and further between than those experienced outside of it. Participating in hard rock and metal culture can be experienced as actually providing moments in which women feel relatively freer from sexism. This conclusion is similar to that of Clifford-Napoleone (Clifford-Napoleone 2015) who argues that metal provides a safe space for queer identified people – a queerscape. This does not mean that homophobia is not present, of course, and Clifford-Napoleone does recount some of the incidents experienced by her respondents. However, queer fans report *fewer* homophobic occurrences at metal events than elsewhere. This suggests a need for a deeper consideration of the way in which an ideal of equality, though not perfectly executed, can lead to better circumstances for minority groups.

Conclusion

In metal culture, as in British society more widely, the marginalisation of women is normalised and unlikely to be recognised as sexism. Discourses of biological difference and of choice associated with postfeminism play their parts in enabling the misrecognition of marginalisation based on sex. Sexual harassment is typically identified as a form of sexism, but arguments about 'banter' and 'fun' served to downplay its significance. The myth of equality works with the subtlety of sexism, acting as a discourse that obfuscates the examples of sexism in metal culture, by calling them unusual, and by highlighting only the common ground between fans (love of the music). It suppresses feminist discourses with the effect of rendering sexism difficult to identify and to challenge. Alongside this the distinction of metal/mainstream gives metal the appearance of being a more equal community. However, my interviewees' spoke of metal as a culture in which they were less likely to experience sexism, not one in which sexism did not exist. Considering all their experiences in patriarchal society, they maintained that the mainstream is an arena that is a more difficult to negotiate in terms of

sexual harassment. In a society that is readily acknowledged as male dominated and that positions women as sex objects, finding a space, like metal, that feels relatively free from sexism is significant. This does not mean that hard rock and metal is not sexist – it is part of sexist society so how could it not be? – just that it is *less* sexist. This does not let men off the hook: when women must play by men's rules they will always be at a disadvantage and, as Nordström and Herz (2013) point out, women fans do struggle to find ways to challenge the status quo. The trouble is, that the myth of equality is so powerful that to question whether equality really exists acts as a threat to metal culture. Nevertheless, it may also serve to produce an atmosphere in which sexism is actually less likely to occur in the first place. The myth of equality is therefore a double-edged sword. Feminist ideas, though they may be at odds with the ideal of equality, are necessary tools in enabling women to identify and organise in order to contest sexism. Metallers need to recognise that if we are to achieve the idealised equality of the genre, we need to get on board with feminism and start acknowledging where the genre and culture falls short.

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