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# **YouTube as a virtual springboard: Circumventing gender dynamics in offline and online metal music careers**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Studies have shown that learning to play in a band is largely a peer-based – rather than individual – experience, shaped by existing sex-segregated friendship networks. With the rise of the Internet and do-it-yourself recording techniques, new possibilities have emerged for music production and distribution. As male-dominated offline metal scenes are often difficult to enter for aspiring female metal musicians, online participation might serve as a possibility to circumvent these gender dynamics. This article therefore addresses to what extent female and male musicians navigate online metal scenes differently, and how this relates to the gender dynamics in offline metal scenes. By conducting ten in-depth interviews with women and men who produce vocal covers on YouTube, this article focuses on the understudied relationship between online and offline scene participation. Vocal covers are used for entertainment, skill development, online skill recognition and as a virtual springboard with which women in particular can (partially) circumvent gender inequality by allowing them to (initially) participate as individuals and pursue musical careers in metal music.*

## **KEYWORDS**

gender inequality  
online  
offline  
YouTube  
musical careers  
virtual springboard

## INTRODUCTION

Music scenes in general – and metal scenes in particular – are highly stratified along gender lines. The consequences of such gender inequality are extensively debated among metal music scholars. Yet, most studies suggest that sexism is still widespread in extreme metal scenes (Kahn-Harris 2007; Vasan 2011). Two possible explanations – among others – can clarify such symbolic marginalization of women. First, metal music is often defined as a form of male rebellion vis-à-vis female bedroom culture (Berkers and Eeckelaer 2014; Frith and McRobbie 1990; Whiteley 2000). Second, playing in a band is largely a male homosocial activity, that is, learning to play in a band is principally a peer-based – rather than individual – experience, shaped by existing sex-segregated friendship networks (Bielby 2003; Clawson 1999). As a result, women are tokens within metal scenes (Kanter 1977); they are part of a numerical and symbolic minority, making them more visible than men. Consequently, they are more likely to be evaluated on their group category and non-ability traits rather than on their individual skills.

However, the emergence of the Internet and online social media have led to virtual scenes (Peterson and Bennett 2004), creating new modes of social conduct that could affect gender dynamics. Social media might facilitate or empower women to actively engage in metal scenes. First, the performance of covers on the video-sharing website YouTube allows women (and men) to produce metal music without needing an actual band. Second, bedroom cultures have become increasingly screen-rich (Livingstone 2007), shattering the traditional distinction between public (male) and private (female) participation. Indeed, previous research on YouTube-commenting has found a relative absence of explicit sexism; instead many comments were rather supportive of female musical production (Schaap and Berkers 2014). However, most popular music studies have focused on offline gender inequality (e.g. Riches et al. 2014; Vasan 2011), whereas studies on Internet usage and online behaviour primarily address online experiences without taking into account the embeddedness of online experiences in offline contexts (for notable exceptions, see e.g. Campbell 2004; De Koster 2010). As such, we know little about the gendered relationship between online and offline music production.

This article therefore investigates the extent to which female and male musicians navigate online metal scenes differently, and how this relates to the gender dynamics in offline metal scenes. In order to answer our research question, we have interviewed vocalists producing extreme metal covers on the video-sharing website YouTube. We will demonstrate that these vocal covers are used for entertainment, skill development, online skill recognition and as a virtual springboard for women in particular to circumvent gender inequality by allowing them to (initially) participate as individuals and pursue musical careers in metal music. Thus, this study provides evidence that the Internet can be used to circumvent – and, at a later stage, potentially challenge – offline gender inequality in male-dominated social domains.

## WOMEN IN EXTREME METAL AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF TOKENISM

Popular music scholars have shown that men are numerically over-represented in metal, both as audience members and as performers. Metal audiences consist mostly of males, varying from 65 to 70% in the United States (Purcell 2003: 100) to 70 to 75% in the United Kingdom (Gruzelier 2007: 62) and 85% in Germany

(Chaker 2013). As such, women are tokens within extreme metal. They are members of the numerical minority (less than fifteen per cent) in skewed groups (Kanter 1977; Roth 2004). Moreover, as a result of widely held cultural beliefs on gender differences – irrespective of numbers – males are generally evaluated as being superior and diffusely more competent than females (Ridgeway 2011). This is particularly the case for women in male-typed occupations (Yoder 1991), such as performers in metal music. Before we discuss two primary causes of tokenism in the production of metal music, we will first address the consequences of this token position (see Schaap and Berkers 2014).

First, because of their visibility, tokens are often evaluated on the basis of being a woman rather than on individual characteristics, resulting in gender-biased evaluations. And since men are often cognitively resistant to disconfirming information (Roth 2004), women are likely to be evaluated primarily as women when performing metal music, resulting in the often articulated phrase ‘you play pretty well, for a girl’ (Carson et al. 2004). However, in our previous study (Schaap and Berkers 2014), we found few examples of outright sexism; most gender-biased evaluations were intended as supportive.

Second, ‘a token does not have to work hard to have her presence noticed, but she does have to work hard to have her achievements noticed’ (Kanter 1977: 216). Hence, women are often evaluated on the basis of non-ability traits – primarily appearance, resulting in what Mulvey (1975) termed the male gaze. She distinguished two male gazes (‘to-be-looked-at-ness’). First, the voyeuristic gaze refers to looking at someone as an object of erotic control. Here we refer to this as the ‘erotic gaze’, where women performers are evaluated as ‘hot’ or ‘sexy’. The fetishistic gaze is also about control, but more in terms of worshipping and objectifying certain aspects of women. We loosely translate this as the ‘romantic love gaze’, in which women are regarded as potential girlfriends or wives. Surprisingly, the latter gaze was slightly more pronounced in our previous study on YouTube comments in extreme metal (Schaap and Berkers 2014).

Third, tokens are subject to role encapsulation – that is, ‘stereotypical assumptions about what tokens ‘must’ be like, such mistaken attributions and biased judgments, tend to force tokens into playing limited and caricatured roles’ (Kanter 1977: 230). These stereotypical roles provide learned expectations, which often leads to – at best – surprise and – at worst – negative reactions when women do not properly fulfil their gender roles. For example, when women engage in the (‘masculine’) practice of moshing, men sometimes react surprised, saying ‘what, you’re a *woman*?’ (Riches et al. 2014: 94, original emphasis). Our previous study indicated that (extremely) negative reactions towards women breaking gender roles are rare – at least online – and are usually not directed at the female performer but at other YouTube commentators.

Besides changing societal beliefs on gender differences, change might come from an increase in the active participation of women in extreme metal, undoing their token status. Yet, while some studies have argued that the number of female performers within metal is steadily increasing (Purcell 2003), recent research on the Toronto metal scene concluded that ‘fewer than 5% of the musicians are women’ (Miller 2014: 467). And as long as women are tokens, their structural reality also confirms gender stereotypes (Ridgeway 2011) – e.g. that women simply cannot play metal, making it exceptionally hard for them to start or join metal bands. However, a recent study on online extreme metal

participation of women has demonstrated that – while remaining highly under-represented – women are less often confronted with the consequences of tokenism than one might expect. Instead, Schaap and Berkers (2014: 112) find ‘a strong focus on music and mutual, intergender support’. They suggest that this might be due to the particularities of the Internet in general and YouTube vocal covers in particular. But before we are able to address these changes, we have to understand the causes of tokenism in extreme metal.

### **CAUSES OF TOKENISM, THE INTERNET AS SPRINGBOARD AND CIRCUMVENTION**

Scholars have pointed to several reasons for the extreme under-representation of women as metal performers, and as such for tokenism. Two important inter-related factors might – to some extent – be circumvented with the help of the Internet in general, and YouTube vocal covers in particular. Both are not unique to – but are more pronounced in – extreme metal. First, extreme metal music is usually performed by a group of individuals, who together form a music band. Previous studies have shown that band formation is largely a peer-based – rather than an individual – experience, shaped by existing sex-segregated friendship networks (Bielby 2003; Clawson 1999). As such, bands operate as tight-knit units in which homosocial solidarity – social bonds between people of the same sex – plays a crucial role (Clawson 1999). Therefore, men have excluded women from bands, rehearsals, recordings, performances and other music-related social activities (Cohen 1991: 208). They are considered a threat for male bonding and are argued to be only interested for reasons unrelated to music (Miller 2014). Second, norms of masculinity and femininity have been closely aligned with rock (‘on-street’) and pop (‘off-street’), respectively (Hill 2014). While both genres are characterized by a particular sound or style of playing music, rock music – extreme metal in particular – has historically been constructed as a form of male rebellion against female domesticators and the ideology of romance (Frith and McRobbie 1990). Rock artists are perceived as independent men who live a rock and roll lifestyle of risk-taking (Berkers and Eeckelaer 2014). Women are mainly regarded as passive and bedroom consumers of allegedly slick, prefabricated – hence, inferior – pop music (Coates 1997: 53). As such, ‘women metalheads must prove that they belong *despite* their femininity, while men are assumed to belong *because* of the masculinity’ (Miller 2014: 477, original emphasis).

However, the Internet might provide some possibilities for circumventing both male homosocial solidarity as well as the public versus private distinction. The arrival of the Internet and the availability of cheap recording software have facilitated vernacular creativity (Burgess 2006) – that is, creative processes that emerge from amateur, and everyday situations. As such, the production of music has to some extent moved from the recording studio to private (bed)rooms, shattering the traditional distinction between public (male) and private (female) participation. Moreover, such changes also make it possible to share recorded fragments and create songs without being in each other’s physical presence. One of the most popular – yet understudied – forms of online music participation is the vocal cover, in which people cover the vocals of songs in front of their webcam and upload this to video-sharing websites such as YouTube. Whereas rock musicians traditionally needed to work in groups, communicate ideas through sound, work together informally, and compose and rehearse simultaneously (Abramo 2011), the vocal cover

allows both men and women to participate in rock and metal music as individuals – literally from their bedroom, without needing an (offline) band.

Yet, while online music participation might help to circumvent the two causes of tokenism as described above, online participation also creates its own gender dynamics. On the one hand, social inequality could be reproduced or even strengthened in online situations, providing a stage for sexism and other kinds of antagonism (Lange 2007; Moor et al. 2010). On the other hand, research on the use of the Internet has demonstrated the potential benefits of online activities for the offline empowerment of marginalized groups (De Koster 2010; De Koster and Houtman 2008; Mehra et al. 2004). In general participants are found to use the Internet as a ‘virtual laboratory’ (Jansz 2005). Both men and women are thus likely to use the comments received on their YouTube vocal covers as a looking-glass self (Cooley [1983] 2011), with which people can evaluate their performance and experiment with the possibility of pursuing an artistic career. Hence, in the relationship between online and offline participation, the Internet can function as a ‘virtual refuge’ (Cabiria 2008) or as a ‘virtual springboard’ (De Koster 2010). Indeed, individuals who experience stigmatization in their daily life can use these online platforms as a virtual ‘refuge’ to the backstage, keeping the boundaries between online and offline life intact, or as a ‘springboard’, with which ‘online participation helps them ameliorate their offline lives’ (De Koster 2010: 572). Whereas forums are closed in nature and difficult to access by non-members, the opposite is true for most of the spaces of virtual metal scenes and particularly the video-sharing website YouTube. With this backstage function removed, the question arises whether marginalized individuals (female metal vocalists) within marginalized groups (metal scenes) experience YouTube as a potential online springboard into participation in the offline metal scene.

## DATA AND METHODS

This exploratory study examines the experiences of female and male vocal cover performers in extreme metal. It is culled from ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with male (four) and female (six) vocal coverers (see Table 1). Several criteria were used to select respondents. First, interviewees had to have performed vocal covers of extreme metal music (e.g. black metal, death metal, deathcore, grindcore) in which they feature themselves. Second,

1. To respect respondents' identity, all names are pseudonyms.
2. This interviewee reports to be in an online band, meaning that this band rehearses and records music over the Internet. More respondents mentioned that they have been part of such online bands in the past.

Gender	Name <sup>1</sup>	Country	Band
Female	Anna	Portugal	Yes
Female	Clarissa	France	No
Female	Gabrielle	Taiwan	Yes
Female	Justine	France	No
Female	Sofia	Italy	Yes
Female	Vicky	South Korea	Yes
Male	Eliot	Slovenia	Yes
Male	Joseph	United States	Yes <sup>2</sup>
Male	Konrad	Australia	No
Male	Paul	United States	Yes

Table 1: Respondent background characteristics (N=10).

we aimed at a diverse selection of respondents, in terms of race, nationality and degree of online participation. We did not select for age as most vocal coverers are within an age range of 15–30. We recruited our respondents through their YouTube channel and – if there was no reaction to our e-mail – through Facebook (vocal cover group).

The interviews were conducted using Skype, and recorded and transcribed verbatim. In some cases the respondents preferred to use Skype messenger, mostly because they were worried about their English language proficiency. Although there are downsides to not being physically present when interviewing (Roulston 2010), there are multiple methodological advantages to utilizing digital interview techniques (cf. Bertrand and Bourdeau 2010; Hanna 2012). Since respondents are very skilled in using computers and software, they are in their comfort zone behind their screens. This is particularly important when respondents are shy and/or uncomfortable with more institutional settings for the interview. Lastly, the international diversity in our exploratory sample would have been impossible to achieve without digital interviewing.

In the interviews we addressed issues of online and offline participation. Regarding their offline activities we focused on the degree and length of involvement and their experiences with gender (in)equality in metal (being or observing a numerical and symbolic minority – tokenism). Regarding their online activities we interviewed our respondents about the production of vocal covers, the reception of their vocal covers and their reasons for doing vocal covers. Importantly, we asked respondents about the potential interplay between online and offline activities – that is, whether online participation was caused by offline circumstances and whether online activities had notable effects on offline participation in the metal scene, and vice versa.<sup>3</sup>

## RESULTS

Overall, respondents address four distinct motivations for producing vocal covers. Vocal covers are made for entertainment, skill development using online feedback, for online skill recognition, and as a virtual springboard. The latter can function to side-step gender dynamics in offline scenes. This does not mean that offline gender inequalities are not reproduced online; we find that women are routinely evaluated on the basis of their gender. Interestingly, this is not always experienced negatively by female vocal coverers, as they acknowledge that it helps them to get attention online (which, based on the amounts of views of our female respondents' videos, seems to be the case indeed). In a process of 'reverse gender discrimination', male respondents comment that they experience this as an unfair advantage that female vocal coverers have over their male counterparts, while emphasizing that evaluation should be based on skills regardless of gender, echoing a gender-blind ideology.

### ***An online stage: Motivations for doing vocal covers***

Both male and female respondents provide similar reasons for starting with the recording and uploading of vocal covers on YouTube. First, respondents' original motivation for sharing vocal covers was for their own entertainment. Anna explains that she uploaded her first vocal cover for fun because 'I just felt like it and I really like that song'. Gabrielle started 'because I wanted to

show and share with the world what I enjoyed'. Paul mentions that he began doing vocal covers to alleviate stress caused by his home situation:

Well it's [doing vocal covers, PB/JS] always been fun. I think that matters a lot. But boredom most of the time too. Because I lived in a house with a lot of people [and] there was a point where none of us really got along. There was a point where we were fighting all the time. So I just locked my door and screamed in the camera for a while because I was bored and wanted nobody to talk to.

When asked how it compares to the offline metal scene, Paul retorts that the online stage is but a weak substitute for the offline metal stage:

Playing in a band is way more fun. You get to feed off energy, off people that you're playing with. People that you're touring with. And people in the crowds, audiences and fans and all that fun stuff. Versus standing and staring in a camera. Like the same amount of people that would be at the show but they're online and they can't see you. Kind of boring.

(see Collins 2011)

Second, all respondents mention that the criticism they receive in comments on their videos, in personal messages or on Facebook is very important for improving their vocal skills. Comments can be positive and negative, 'as long as they are constructive', according to Eliot. Vicky claims that the primary reason for making her initially private vocal cover videos public was the usefulness of the feedback she received: 'it's good to upload and hear more opinions from different countries. I also learned from the YouTube comments and when I saw some positive comments, it gave me energy to keep on going!' Clarissa explains that the criticism she receives, especially when it is negative, is the only way to improve her skills as institutionalized courses for metal vocals are non-existent: '[there are] few teachers for this vocal technique, so it's the only way to know what is good or not'. Justine explains that she wants her videos to be viewed 'by other metal musicians, people who can help me to get a better level, who can appreciate death metal as I do'. Sofia underlines the importance of receiving feedback from the online metal community, especially when it is advice: 'When I started to learn how to do growl vocals I thought it was a good idea to get feedback from the internet. So I made those videos but most of the "negative" comments were actually very helpful, because many guys gave me advice'.

Respondents monitor the feedback they receive to different degrees, but no one claims to pay no attention at all. Unwelcome comments are rarely deleted, as hostile comments are frequently addressed by a multitude of YouTube commenters, clearing-out harsh antagonism by means of social control. For example, when Anna received a comment saying that she should stick to looking good rather than doing vocal covers, she says: 'I didn't find it nice at all. And so I answered and I think some other guys said something about it too like: "what a douche comment"'. This active engagement of other commentators is deeply appreciated by the respondents and seems to foster a sense of togetherness and community that fights antagonism and – in this case – sexism.

Third, vocalists are aware of the online stage that YouTube offers and purposively aim to gain recognition in the virtual metal scene. Gabrielle

explains that this – together with enjoying metal music – was the prime reason she ventured into YouTube to showcase her vocal skills:

I have to admit though even then I had an intention of spreading my name. Basically, I want to be known. For a long time I've been wanting to become a professional metal musician, but as a student I didn't have much to do to become one. YouTube was one way that I found out to help achieve my dream then.

Similarly, Paul explains that he started posting vocal covers online when he was 15 years old with the sole objective of getting noticed by bands for his skills. When this did not happen for him he was disappointed 'because I've done this for so long and have no recognition'. Although he claims to have 'stopped caring' for this initial goal, he did continue the production of vocal covers based on the enjoyment he finds in it. Joseph also aims to gain recognition within the online vocal cover scene, without necessarily building a bridge to the offline scene: 'I want to put myself out there in the YouTube metal scene more. I look up to YouTube metal vocalists like Ryan Strain, Chris Breetzi, etc. They influenced me to change the way I cover songs'.

Fourth, besides trying to gain online recognition, most vocalists use the online stage as a springboard to a physical band and stage. Konrad aimed to gain recognition online and has received this to a certain extent, but explains that his main purpose is to start a band in his hometown, as he has not succeeded in finding like-minded individuals offline:

I don't like to consider myself artist. At best, I'm a YouTube karaoke channel. So people who subscribe to my channel and dig my vocals go a long way to keep me doing what I'm doing. [Ö] I do link a lot of people to my channel in the hope I can use it to find of like-minded musicians into black metal in my hometown.

When asked about the intended audience for her videos, Clarissa explained that she mainly makes them for a 'potential future band, because I'm looking for a band'. Justine also says that 'I always keep a little hope that a group which looking for a singer, watches my video'. Although she did not find her current band due to her vocal covers, Anna did use one of her vocal covers to display her skills when she replied to an ad on a classified advertisements website: 'I found someone who was looking for a vocalist. And [Ö] that cover that I did before, that I took from the internet, I had on the ad'. Hence, she feels that the ability to showcase her skills online before auditioning in an offline rehearsal space increased her chances of joining a metal band, as other offline options had failed for her in the past. Gabrielle explains that, like herself, a lot of vocalists use this springboard function and are successful in doing so: 'A lot of screamers are like that, they first get popular and then get in a band, and then they try to make their bands popular from then on via YouTube'. Some respondents – like Gabrielle – indeed feel that the online metal scene has empowered them to start a metal band since 'offline, things are pretty different', by which she means that it is more difficult to breach the gender boundaries in the offline metal scene. This springboard function that YouTube offers to female vocalists in particular is even more important due to the irreplaceability of the offline stage – still 'the holiest of heavy metal

communions' (Gruzelier 2007: 59). As Clarissa put it, 'I prefer to be in a band! [Ö] When you are in a band, you play seriously, you have a lot of ideas and more fun!'

### ***Consequences of tokenism: Visibility and gender-biased evaluations***

Instead of being passive victims of gender-biased evaluations, some female vocalists in extreme metal actively try to use their token status to their advantage. They sometimes label their videos with terms such as 'girl', 'female' or 'woman' in a process of self-marking. When we asked Sofia about her reasons for doing this, she responded that she 'found it to be a good attention grabber'. Similarly, Anna feels that her gender 'is kind of good for the band to be known with a girl because it's different from normal. So people get more interested in what's different'. When asked what her experiences are as a female vocalist of an extreme metal band, Clarissa explains that it helps to draw attention to her band as well. According to her, bands ask themselves the question whether to actively use the female vocalist's gender as a promotional tool as it attracts 'more women or guys who are coming to see "the girl who screams like a bear"'. However, several other female respondents see their high visibility as potentially problematic, as can be observed in this excerpt from our interview with Gabrielle:

Gabrielle: When we first had a show, words spread quickly among people that there is a girl screamer. A lot of people, even more than I had thought, knew about me before they had even seen me. So being female does affect my popularity.

Interviewer: And do you see this as a good thing?

Gabrielle: It's a double-edged sword, as I see it. I get to be talked about, and thus be more popular because of my sex. However, it also blurs what I actually do, the singing and my overall ability as a musician, vocalist, and a front woman. One of the things people say that I hate the most is: 'Your screaming is pretty good for a girl'.

In a similar vein, Justine observes how due to extreme metal's ('masculine') conventions, bands might not want to risk estranging their conservative audience:

It [having a female vocalist, PB/JS] can be positive because the band could be different from the others thanks to me, but it is a negative point because most of bands have a male singer, and they don't want to 'change' because they don't know how their audiences will react. I think a female guttural singer in France would be something new, and the French are maybe not ready.

Male respondents validate this observation of high visibility as a double-edged sword. Even without self-marking their videos, female visibility and subsequent attention is repeatedly interpreted as an unfair advantage of women over men. The idea that gender should not matter anymore for individual success is firmly rooted in neo-liberal ideologies of evaluations based on merit,

resulting in the idea that we live in a 'gender-blind' society (Andersen 2001). A mild example that can be interpreted as this perceived reversal of gender discrimination is shared by Konrad:

I guess what frustrates me though, is [that] a lot of people are very reactive to click on a female vocal cover link just because they are female. Most with fetishes for girls that scream, which they are hoping a good looking too. I question sometimes whether some of those vocalists would have received as many views if they wore full blown costumes like some bands do, or the title in their YouTube video didn't use the word 'girl' of 'female'.

Upon being asked whether he finds this unfair, he nuances his argument: 'I wouldn't say unfair, because it's a free online community and people have the right to choose what they click'. In a similar vein, Eliot reasons along comparable lines that echo reverse gender discrimination:

I think it is really great that girls are getting into extreme vocals and making covers and starting their own YouTube. But I have to be honest here and I know this might sound a bit selfish but I think there is also a bit of truth in this. I think that girls have a *very big* advantage when it comes to making extreme vocal covers on YouTube. The response and feedback is in general larger and this kind of gives me mixed feelings. For example, I would work very hard and involve a lot of technique in my cover, whereas a girl can be an average singer and get a much bigger response than me. But on the other hand I ask myself: Is she really getting the attention because people think she is really good or just because she is a girl?

(original emphasis)

As can be seen, both male and female respondents stress that evaluation should be based on skills rather than on gender or appearance, while stressing the importance of the inclusion of women vocalists in extreme metal. However, in a mechanism that is reminiscent of 'race talk' (e.g. Doane 1996; Myers and Williamson 2001), both male and female respondents discursively minimize their (rarely intended) gender discrimination by drawing from a supposedly gender-blind ideology that is dominant in society.

### **Consequences of tokenism: Males gazes**

Remarks commonly include an element of women being evaluated on the basis of appearance and non-ability traits, leading to female objectification and sexualization. This male gaze, which can be romantic (e.g. 'I wish I had a girlfriend like you') or erotic (e.g. 'You're hot'), is often reported by female respondents. Clarissa emphasizes that the focus is often on *seeing* the band rather than on *hearing* it (cf. Walsler 1993), wherein the female vocalist is presented as eye-candy to the audience and hence subjected to the male gaze. Sofia minimizes comments that she receives online by interpreting them humourously:

Some guys said I was a good vocalist; some guys said the cover was well done or some just said 'marry me'. Twenty or so in total of course. I LOL'D [Internet-slang for 'laughing out loud', PB/JS]. I think maybe it's

because there are not so many girls doing growl vocals so when someone finds a girl doing that stuff they are overly happy.

Not all comments are laughed away in a similar way. Especially a single-minded focus on appearance irritates Justine as it draws attention away from her skills: 'If I wanted someone to give me an opinion on my body I would have videos of beauty or modelling! But this is not what I want ... It is sometimes painful, as some do not listen to what we [female vocalists] do and comment to tell us that we are pretty'. Equally angered, Gabrielle decided to place 'I AM FEMALE – not a boy, nor a she-male – so stop asking!' (original emphasis) in the description of one of her videos because 'I was quite annoyed at the moment. My hair was short so people kept asking about if I was a boy or a girl. Rather in a rude manner oftentimes. Like: "wtf? Are you girl or boy?"' Justine summarizes this disadvantage aptly: 'People judge girls on their appearance. If you are an ugly man with a great level you can succeed. But if you are an ugly female with a great level, it will be more difficult to succeed'. However, the above-mentioned examples do illustrate that women are not 'just' passive victims of the male gazes as suggested by Mulvey (1975).

### ***Consequences of tokenism: Breaking of gender roles***

Breaking stereotypical assumptions about what roles women can (or should) play in extreme metal often leads to – at best – surprise and – at worst – negative reactions. When Gabrielle responded online to an advertisement of a deathcore band looking for a vocalist they first responded: 'Did you read our genre correctly? We are a deathcore band'. After hearing Gabrielle's vocal covers 'They were rather stunned. I was the first girl screamer they had ever seen'. Vicky explains that when she performs live she is first observed as a woman, and second as a vocalist of an extreme metal band:

At the show, most of people got surprised to hear my voice and they feel [it is] hard to imagine. Because maybe my look is not in a 'male' way. And also not the sexy style look or beautiful style. Most of the people said I look 'cute,' even though I really don't think so – haha. So they're surprised a lot. Some people said: 'Damn! That girl looks like Hello Kitty or Pikachu, but her screaming sounds terrible!'

Here Vicky also replicates the tendency for female metal musicians and fans to be categorized as either a tomboy or as hyper-feminine (Berkers 2012; Vasan 2010). On top of that, double-stereotyping occurs due to intersectionality: the combination of being female *and* non-white. In this case, Vicky's vocal covers break not only female role expectations but also Asian female role expectations. As she explains,

I think most of the comments are positive because [it's] hard to see [that] a female can do growling like a man. Especially an Asian female, I guess? So most people say that they are surprised, and are impressed. Also some girls – especially Asian girls – said they feel proud of me; because they noticed an Asian female can do this as well.

As the above example shows, the visibility of gender roles being broken online can also serve as an incentive for other women to strive for a career in

metal. In this way, female vocalists and vocal coverers function as inspiring role models for peers. Especially Angela Gossow, the ex-vocalist of Swedish melodic death metal band Arch Enemy, is seen as the prime role model for female extreme metal vocalists:

Interviewer: Does it matter to you that the vocalists of these bands are also female?

Justine: Yes, I think this it is important, because it shows that girls are able to be in a metal band and to sing guttural and not only in clear voice. Angela from Arch Enemy is a model for me, she proves to people a woman can be a real metal singer.

Later she adds, 'I want to be on stage and to be a new Angela, haha!' Equally, Gabrielle explains:

Basically the reason why I started screaming was Arch Enemy. They have great music, and the fact that the front singer is female motivated me, I guess. It was just plain impressive when I first saw them live on YouTube. The music was great, the singer was great, and the singer was female! I began thinking that I wanted to do the same as Angela Gossow, the singer for Arch Enemy, and that's how I started.

Lastly, Vicky mentioned that after falling in love with death metal it was Angela Gossow who made her realize that she could do this as well: 'And one day I heard Arch Enemy, noticed they have female vocals [and] I thought: "wow it's awesome! A female can scream like that! How to do it?"' In general, our female respondents report feeling empowered by metal music and do not feel that the scene's unequal gender dynamics are restraining for them. When Anna performs with her band she frequently encounters stage professionals and audience members who mistakenly see her as the band's guitarist or bassist rather than the vocalist, but vent their positive surprise when she starts screaming. She – as other respondents – sees this as unproblematic for her career in metal music: 'I don't really mind. I'm doing something I like. So I don't worry too much about what other people think'.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This article aimed to demonstrate the extent to which female and male musicians navigate online metal scenes differently and how this relates to gender dynamics in offline metal scenes. Although female vocalists are a numerical minority in the production of metal music online, motivations for producing and sharing vocal covers on YouTube are largely similar for male and female vocalists. First, for obvious reasons, vocal covers are produced as personal entertainment, as a means of showcasing and sharing appreciation for extreme metal. Second, the feedback that vocal coverers receive on their videos is sought for and utilized for skill development. As YouTube offers an online stage within the virtual metal scene, vocal covers are – third – used to gain online recognition for vocal skills. Fourth, vocalists aim to use – with varying degrees of success – this online stage as a virtual springboard to the offline

stage, as vocal covers are open auditions for bands. It is this latter mechanism that proves to be a highly beneficial tool for female vocalists who, because of their token status in the offline extreme metal scene, can circumvent offline gender dynamics effectively.

Even though male and female motivations are largely similar, their experiences diverge considerably. As tokens, women experience a higher visibility in male-dominated metal scenes. Our interview data show that this is seen as both advantageous and problematic for female vocalists. On the one hand, female vocalists feel that they benefit from being noticed easier than men because it makes their videos and bands more popular. This partly goes against the notion that the extreme metal scene has such strong masculine genre conventions that deviation is always frowned upon. Especially popular female-fronted extreme metal bands such as Arch Enemy, Holy Moses and The Agonist are heralded as game changers that helped breach these strong symbolic boundaries. On the other hand, female vocal coverers consider it problematic that they are noticed because of their gender rather than their skills. Interestingly, male vocal coverers – who actively encourage female vocalists – experience women’s increased visibility as somewhat unfair for the same reason. This experienced reverse gender discrimination is instructed by a gender-blind ideology where everyone – regardless of gender – should be evaluated on skills rather than gender.

Women also experience objectification and sexualization due to the male gaze of YouTube commentators. Consequently, female vocalists are judged more often on their appearance than are men. Women also receive many comments that contain love interests, marriage proposals and sexual references. They deal with this in various ways: from minimizing, humorous interpretations to annoyance and irritation for not being respected. Continually having to defend themselves in proving that they are legitimate metal vocalists is exhausting, nevertheless, respondents mention that the production of metal music helps to alleviate this stress and empower them to continue. Although all female vocalists who we interviewed feel that they are breaking gender roles by striving to obtain a career in metal music – and have experienced many online and offline instances where this was made evident – well-known vocal coverers and female vocalists serve as role models.

Although some findings are in line with previous research on gender inequality in the reception and production of extreme metal music (Miller 2014), we find that gender dynamics online are not experienced as being as symbolically skewed as most studies suggest. Both women and men show a high degree of reflexivity regarding the topic of gender inequality in metal music and are, especially female vocalists, very aware of the complexity that this entails. Although discrimination, sexism and antagonism seem equally present online and offline, YouTube functions as a virtual springboard to the stage and has hence opened up the possibility for increased female participation in the production of extreme metal music. However, it remains to be seen whether this also goes for female instrumentalists. As the position of guitarist holds the most status in metal music, it might remain a male privilege. Instead of interpreting online–offline participation as a binary opposition of potential empowerment vis-à-vis continued or further exclusion, this article sought to demonstrate how users find both advantages and disadvantages in their usage of YouTube.

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