5.4. Amplified heteronormativity in online heavy metal spaces

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Abstract

Research into online heavy metal spaces has shown that there exists a distinct reliance on themes of hyper-masculinity. These themes seem to reflect heteronormative assumptions about the dominance of men over women held in wider society more generally. This paper will examine the sources of some of the themes of masculinity that exist in online heavy metal spaces. A suggestion will be made that the underlying notions of patriarchy inherent in social media technologies and heavy metal culture more generally appear to come together to contribute to an amplified reliance on heteronormativity that is typified by hyper-masculine dominance in the majority of these spaces.

Keywords: heavy metal, online spaces, heteronormativity, masculinity.

The original presentation that I delivered at the Keep It Simple Make It Fast conference in 2016 was entitled *Amplified gender binaries in online heavy metal spaces*. Whether as a result of my haste or as part of an on-going thought process this title was clearly erroneous. There is nothing all that interesting about gender binaries in online space. Australian, and much of western, society is based around an idea that every citizen will fit neatly into the category of either woman or man; that is, either *female* or *male*. As we go about our day using public restrooms, buying clothes from a department store, or watching television we are bombarded with messages about fitting in to the norm of binary gender. What *is* interesting with regard to binary gender is that they reflect the "ideology of sexual difference (…) which serves to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to a (…) political order" (Wittig, 1992, p. 2). This political order is based on normative heterosexuality and aims to exert social control over women and men. That is, the maintaining of heterosexual men's dominance over women. Interestingly, in online heavy metal spaces the themes that demonstrate these politics of gender seem to exhibit an amplified reliance on heteronormativity in their visibility. This paper draws on research conducted in online heavy metal spaces to contribute to a discussion of the ways in which understandings of masculinities and heteronormativity seem to be evolving as social interactions shift to technologically mediated online social spaces.

In referring to heteronormativity a useful approach to borrow is that of Stevi Jackson when she discusses heteronormativity as encompassing both sexuality *and* gender (2006). That is, it " (…) defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life" (2006, p. 107). While heteronormativity is ostensibly predicated on the concept of heterosexual desire and practice it also encompasses the intersections and social divisions of gender. The effect of this conflation of sexuality and gender into a binary norm is to dictate acceptable and unacceptable social interactions by participants based on an understanding of their individual gender identity. That is, the dominance of heterosexuality seems to determine more than sexual behaviour and identity; it is a basis for the wider social order. In the case of my research it appears that the evidence of the online community's reliance on heteronormativity seems to be written in themes of hyper-masculinity.

What is interesting about a conflation of gender and sexual identities in online heavy metal spaces, in particular, is the amplified reliance on heteronormativity and subsequent emergence of

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a *hyper*-masculinity. My analysis of these spaces suggests that there are two underlying factors which contribute to this visible hyper-masculinity. Firstly, heavy metal culture brings with it solid notions of masculine gender identity that can be found in the language and imagery of heavy metal culture more broadly. Secondly, the technology that is used to access online heavy metal spaces is founded on a design process which is itself based in patriarchy. It is my position that the observable themes of hyper-masculinity existent in online heavy metal spaces are due to an interference of the language and imagery and the technology in these spaces. Moreover, these themes create a framework of acceptable gender identity for all participants. These themes and their essence in language and imagery is recorded by the technology in these online spaces, contributing to the emergence of hyper-masculinity and solidifying these amplified heteronormative messages for the foreseeable future.

1. Existing notions of masculinity in heavy metal

Heavy metal music and culture outside of and prior to the shift to online spaces is clearly founded in patriarchy. One of the core reasons why my interest in the sociology of gender and sexuality turned to heavy metal music in online spaces was that the language and imagery clearly demonstrated masculine dominance. As Walser suggests: "Heavy metal is, inevitably, a discourse shaped by patriarchy" (1993, p. 108). A useful way of understanding the gendered meanings offered in heavy metal outside of online spaces is through a thematic analysis of the messages of masculinity in heavy metal artefacts. My doctoral research included analysis of images from several heavy metal album covers which draw on the themes of masculinity I have observed in online heavy metal spaces. Importantly, these covers were identified by participants as being representative of said themes. In this paper I will draw on one of the album covers to illustrate my point about the representation and politics of gender in heavy metal spaces as reflecting messages of dominant masculinity.

Exeloume, a Norwegian heavy metal band, released *Fairytale of Perversion* in 2011. This album cover features a strong male in the foreground. He has flesh covered hands with white European skin tone. His head is only a skull with no eyes or flesh. This man is wearing military inspired uniform with Nazi paraphernalia and a bloodstained blacksmith apron. Holding red hot smithing tongs he shows a sinister grin while preparing to use the tongs to perhaps molest or maim one of three semi-naked women behind him. The women in the image are tied up and appear to be panic-stricken and in fear of what is to follow in this scenario. The image clearly evinces the idea of male dominance and female subordination simply through the idea that a man is in a position where he apparently intends to cause physical pain to women who are at his mercy. There is clearly a message of male dominance in the drama of the scene however one can also "unpack" the static image; the image that populates the aesthetic of heavy metal culture more generally and aligns with themes of male dominance that abound in heavy metal culture more broadly.

Deena Weinstein in her key text on heavy metal music suggests that "Power, the essential inherent and delineated meaning of heavy metal, is culturally coded as a masculine trait" (1991, p. 67). She is referring to Simone de Beauvoir's active masculine / passive feminine dichotomy from *The Second Sex* (1949) and highlights the masculine power to act rather than be acted upon. This is a clear masculine trait which can be seen in the imagery of the *Exeloume* album described above among others. The male in the foreground of the image can be seen as the active participant holding red hot tongs supposedly to inflict pain and suffering upon the helpless, tied up, and passive women in the scene. While this might be passed off as ostensibly a fantastical cartoon image of an impossibly gaunt male torturer it still clearly contributes to the themes of masculine power and privilege over women. This is one of many images which regardless of specific context tend to reflect such positioning of men and women in regards to power and tend to populate the aesthetic of heavy metal culture more generally.

In terms of a reading of the heteronormativity in this image the depiction of active, violent men and passive, sexualised women aligns with Wittig's (1992) suggestions that the heteronormative or binary gender order is aimed at reifying a dominant political order: of men over women. Such depictions of dominant masculinity in heavy metal culture reflects Western society's patriarchal capitalism — the aim of which is to position women at the site of reproduction as dependant, passive, and powerless. It is no surprise that heavy metal culture reflects conceptions of gender tied up in capitalist ideology. Similar messages can be seen across popular culture from *Rambo* to *Star Wars*, *UFC* and *Australian Rules* football. How this is useful is as a starting point to look at online heavy metal spaces. These and similar themes of heteronormative masculine dominance appear to migrate to the online heavy metal spaces and underpin the amplified reliance on heteronormativity that exists in the online language and imagery.

2. Existing notions of masculinity in technology

Early communication through the internet was heralded as providing an exciting opportunity to meet with likeminded users to discuss the latest news and reviews of. One of the first experiences with internet communication that I had was using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) that required the use of a downloadable satellite programme to log on to one of many servers located around the world. Often, the conversation through this service was prefaced with a request for information about age, sex, and location. Upon reflection of this common request it seems indicative of a desire to imagine the gender identity of the user on the other end of the line. Sociologically speaking this comes as no surprise. Kessler and McKenna suggest, "gender attribution forms the foundation for understanding (…) gender role and gender identity" (1978, p. 2). That is, social interaction includes all sorts of cues based around language and the presentation of self (Goffman, 1949) that are most often tied to gender. It seems that, in online spaces, taking the visual cues about gender away only made our reliance on it all the more visible.

Internet communication has evolved significantly since IRC based communication was the focus of social media technology. As technology evolved and internet connections became more robust and reliable more data was able to be brought into our homes. Online heavy metal spaces in this research now include much higher resolution images, videos and, audio files embedded in them as part of the sharing of imagery. Interestingly, the means of communication amongst members is still very much based on text. An image may be shared and promoted but the discussion is almost always reliant on simple text. So, although the need for the age, sex, and location question upon first contact online has all but gone, the language and imagery that is created in these spaces is still highly visible, highly gendered and recorded indefinitely. It is this indefinite recording and sharing of language that provides an ideal opportunity to observe how notions of gender online can come to be in response to interference between meanings of heavy metal music and the technology used to access the space.

So what do I mean by online heavy metal spaces? Online heavy metal spaces are websites which may or may not require accounts to be held by participants where there is a platform for computer mediated communication amongst fellow fans. The topics of conversation are not always strictly heavy metal related but the overarching theme of the space and the common interest is a preference for heavy metal music (in all its forms). For a number of reasons, it is web based heavy metal communities that utilise forum style chat rooms for communication that have been the focus of my research. Forum style chat rooms offer a wealth of data for the online ethnographer. Often this data is searchable and recorded indefinitely leading to increased speed of data collection and the chronological freedom to take either snapshots of conversations or more longitudinal samples. The research carried out for this paper was conducted over the course of a three-year period which ended in mid-2016.

Importantly all of the online heavy metal spaces that I observed were reliant on computer technology for access. Most of the spaces were most easily accessible through the use of a desktop

or laptop computer. Though no research was done into exact means of connection, discussion with participants and recent scholarship on internet connectivity (Lenhart *et al.*, 2010) would indicate a growing trend of mobile device connections such as smart phones and tablet PCs. These devices and the software in online heavy metal spaces are technologies that share similar patriarchal foundations to technology more generally. Wajcman highlights the continued political nature of heteronormative gender in the workplace especially in regard to the development and monopolisation of new technologies by men over women (1991). The control of the technologies related to connection and especially to software design or web architecture in online heavy metal spaces reflects this trend. A clear example, and one which I choose to focus on in this paper, is the militaristic organisation of the forums on several of the online spaces in which I conducted research. This involves ranking of participants along a continuum of military insignia such as commander, lieutenant, and private. The appeal to military-like organisation has clear links with the ultra-masculine imagery of the *Exeloume* (and many other) album covers.

3. Interference of masculinities from technology and heavy metal culture

If we take that there exists a reliance on notions of heteronormative power and patriarchy in heavy metal culture more generally and that the technologies associated with these spaces also harbour patriarchal notions of dominance we can look at possible interference of meaning as per Latour's meanings of technical mediation (1999). This interference creates a space that fosters a hyper-masculinity unseen in offline heavy metal spaces. It is worth noting that in such an exploratory paper as this I choose to acknowledge but move away from Latour's position *vis a vis* mastery — technology's mastery of humans or human mastery of technology (1999, p. 180). This is in favour of an adaptation of his concept of interference in which Riis highlights a useful asymmetry — between human and non-human (2008). This asymmetry allows for my emphasis on a clear human centred and highly political bias in the interference of communication technology and heavy metal music culture in online heavy metal spaces based around gender politics. That is, it is necessary to locate men in a more active position in regard to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity rather than the technology or heavy metal culture.

Interference can simply be understood as the coming together of meanings that, together, allow new meanings to emerge. Latour uses the common adage, guns don't kill people, people kill people (1999) to preface his concepts of technical mediation and interference. Essentially Latour takes issue with the National Rifle Association's absolution of responsibility from the technology of the gun itself. Latour argues "that the gun adds something" (1999, p. 177) to the relationship between the owner and itself. For instance, an individual who may intend on engaging in non-lethal assault with her fists, when offered the use of a gun, may alter her intentions and fatally shoot her victim. In his description Latour touches on both materialist and, what he terms, sociological approaches to the dilemma of the gun-human interaction. That is, either the gun has all the power or meaning and controls the relationship or it has none. For my paper is it sufficient to understand the interference of masculinity in heavy metal and the technology both "add something" to the amplification of heteronormativity.

So Latour's concept of interference, or importantly, my reinterpretation of it seems initially useful in grasping a better understanding of how the meanings of heavy metal culture more generally and the patriarchy inherent in online communication technology come together to facilitate a model of hyper-masculinity. Interference in such a case would suggest that the meanings behind heavy metal music, the imagery of male dominance, violence, and oppression of women, as seen in the example of *Exeloume's* album cover, have a very real effect on the creation of meaning within online heavy metal spaces. Moreover, the inherent patriarchy, adequately described by Wajcman (1991), in technology and the design of software also contributes, through interference, to the creation of meaning in these spaces.

I will focus on one of the ways I have observed possible interference of meaning related to an amplified reliance on heteronormative ideals — what I have termed hyper-masculinity. This is the militaristic organisation of the online heavy metal spaces themselves. As mentioned earlier in this paper participants, men and women, in some online heavy metal spaces are assigned ranks based on their participation (contribution to forum posts, donations, and attendance at offline events). The history of gender politics in the military is one of women's exclusion as evidenced by Wheelwright's acknowledgement that despite women's crucial roles in Western military efforts, historically "female soldiers came to be regarded as aberrations of nature" (1987, p. 489). A reliance on a system of social order which overtly privileges men over women is in itself exclusionary. It is my position that the dominance of men in the design of the software, that is the inherent patriarchy in men's monopolisation of technology Wajcman (1991) and the reliance on an exclusionary ideal of militaristic organisation is one side of the "interference coin" that contributes to an amplified reliance on heteronormativity. The other side of the "coin", and the necessary second contributor to the interference being played out in online heavy metal spaces is the already existing themes of masculine dominance described earlier in this paper and which can be seen in the example of *Exeloume's* album.

These two meanings of masculinity, the messages in heavy metal culture generally and the patriarchy in technology and militaristic organisation of participants, alongside each other do not necessarily provide the basis from which to draw a notion of amplified heteronormativity. It is the interference of these two meanings that creates a new trajectory of meaning — an amplified reliance on heteronormativity. In the case of the online heavy metal spaces that I have observed it is the opportunities for men to further dominate the conversation through an apparent collective preference for masculine language. The arrangement of participants along a militaristic continuum of ranking requires individuals to be well versed in and practice the use of masculine, militaristic language in order to participate. The discussion of cultural artefacts specific to an ultra-masculine heavy metal culture interferes with or combines with the limitations of male dominated technological spaces to create an amplified reliance on heteronormativity and practice of men's dominance over women.

So there is nothing all that interesting about a reliance on binary notions of gender having followed our shift into online social spaces. The overwhelming visibility of gender in everyday life tends to be predicated on a politics of gender that assumes a natural correlation between gender and biological sex that must fit within the woman — man dichotomy. Notions of men's dominance over women exist in heavy metal cultures more generally and can be seen in album covers that depict, often disturbing, ultra-masculine behaviours. Technology and the design of software and online spaces is also clearly a sphere of masculine dominance. An adaptation of one of Latour's (1999) meanings of technical mediation (interference) offers one way of looking at the coming together of heavy metal culture and the technology of online spaces to create an amplified reliance on heteronormativity. A result of the hyper-masculinity that exists in online heavy metal spaces and the characteristic visibility of social interactions through recorded text based conversation is that these spaces continually reify the dominance of patriarchy that comes with an amplified reliance on heteronormativity.

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