Suicide, Self-Harm and Survival Strategies in Contemporary Heavy Metal Music: A Cultural and Literary Analysis

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Abstract   This paper seeks to think creatively about the body of research which claims there is a link between heavy metal music and adolescent alienation, self-destructive behaviours, self-harm and suicide. Such research has been criticised, often by people who belong to heavy metal subcultures, as systematically neglecting to explore, in a meaningful manner, the psychosocial benefits for individuals who both listen to contemporary heavy metal music and socialize in associated groups. We argue that notions of survival, strength, community, and rebellion are key themes in contemporary heavy metal music. Through literary-lyrical analysis of a selection of heavy metal tracks, this paper aims to redress the balance of risk and benefit. We argue that listening to this type of music, the accompanying social relationships, sense of solidarity and even the type of dancing can ameliorate tumultuous and difficult emotions. Songs which could be read as negative can induce feelings of relief through the sense that someone else has felt a particular way and recovered enough to transform these emotions into a creative outlet. This genre of music may therefore not *increase* the risk of untoward outcomes in any simple sense but rather represent a valuable resource for young people in difficulty.

Keywords   Self-harm · Suicide · Heavy metal music · Subcultures · Adolescence · Alienation

This paper sets out to address the oft-cited relationship between heavy metal music and adolescent self-harm. Whilst frequently assumed, this alleged relationship originates in stereo-types held by parents, educators, policymakers and researchers and is often only tenuously supported by study of young people themselves. As Martin Barker (1984) has pointed out, each generation of new media has been interpreted by many social commentators as being potentially harmful and apt to have a particularly pernicious effect on children. The rise of mass literacy in the 19th century was accompanied by concerns about the effects of 'penny dreadfuls', cinema yielded concerns about potential delinquency and deteriorations in young

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people's 'deportment', the 1950s saw campaigns to limit children's access to television and American horror comics, the 1980s saw moral panics about 'video nasties' and the 21st century has seen the focus shift to young people's access to computer games, mobile communications technologies and the internet. Among all these fears, popular music directed at young people has occupied an elevated place in the pantheon of vices, enjoyment of which is supposed to yield a variety of psychosocial and behavioural inexpediencies such as drug taking, poor school achievement, trouble with the law, suicide, drinking and limited employment skills. In terms of the imputed power to yield adverse outcomes, there are some genres, for example heavy metal and rap, which have a particularly negative image, especially in the mass media (Binder 1993; Fried 2003). In this paper, we will focus on heavy metal as this genre, broadly defined, has a long history of attracting negative views from representatives of the official world—pressure groups, parents, policymakers and, importantly, the research and health professional communities. Deena Weinstein provides a useful summary of the much publicized battles between heavy metal bands, fans, parental representative groups and the legal system, demonstrating how the linkage between adolescent violence, suicide, self-harm and heavy metal became seen as factual rather than mythical (Weinstein 2000, 237–275. See also Christie 2004).

In the UK, self-harm is a major issue during adolescence. Indeed, the Mental Health Foundation, who conducted the 2006 *National Inquiry into Self Harm among Young People*, goes so far as to suggest that self-harm among adolescents is "a major public health issue in the UK. It affects at least 1 in 15 young people" (Mental Health Foundation 2006, 5). Other estimates have found that at least one in ten children and young people have self-harmed (McDougall, Armstrong and Trainor 2010, 32) while others still have suggested the figure is around 6–9 % (Hawton et al. 2002). The varying methodologies of such prevalence studies account for many of the differences in findings—but an accurate figure is unlikely to be found due to the very nature of self-harm. It is often a secretive, even shameful activity, which does not come to the attention of medical, health or educational professionals—Hawton et al. for example report that only 12.6 % of the individuals who admitted to self-harming in their study attended hospital for this (2002, 1207). When it *does* come to the attention of adults, we know that it is often dismissed, derided or demonised (McDougall, Armstrong and Trainor 2010, 86–90; Mental Health Foundation 2006). Defining self-harm is a thorny issue—here, we refer to self-harm as encompassing a broad range of actions and behaviours along a spectrum of self-injury to potentially destructive actions. The reasons behind self-harm are complex, highly individual and unique—but often carry a theme of self-harm as a coping strategy, as a relief of overwhelming or negative emotions, a catharsis, and as a way of feeling something other than numb (McDougall, Armstrong and Trainor 2010; Mental Health Foundation 2006; Spandler 1996; Spandler and Warner 2007). As we demonstrate, such themes, effects and experiences are echoed in the accounts of heavy metal fans—not through self-harm but through the music, the culture and the live music event.

The purported relationship between heavy metal, self-harm and suicide has surfaced again recently with the rising popularity of 'Emo' music and culture, often in a sensationalist manner despite the paucity of research in this area (Hill 2011; Martin 2006). Indeed, the Mental Health Foundation emphatically states that they found *no* evidence "to support the belief that this [self-harming] behaviour may be an integral part of a particular youth sub-culture, whether it is 'Goth' (as parts of the media tend to assert) or other" (2006, 28). Belonging to a metal subculture is often discussed as a homogenous experience—actually, one can see many splits, such as Emo, Goth, Punk, Metalcore, and those who prefer underground metal scenes, those who prefer commercial metal, and the majority who like a bit of everything. Weinstein refers to heavy metal as a 'bricolage', a particularly apt analysis that we agree with, hence our use of the

term heavy metal to refer to a broad range of musical subcultures (Weinstein 2000, 5–6). Research into the relationship between heavy metal and self harm tends not to discriminate or investigate these distinctions in too much depth—the media, even less so. Here, however, we aim to draw on some of the positive reported impacts of belonging to a heavy metal subculture without detailing which subculture has the 'most' benefits (there is not the research to enable us to do so here; however, we suggest routes for this in our conclusion). We comment briefly on notions of community and solidarity attainted through attendance at music gigs and concerts before providing a lyrical analysis of a selection of songs by one popular heavy metal band, *Slipknot*, considering themes of community, strength and survival as an underexplored element to this musical phenomenon.

Music and controversy—adolescence, self-destruction, and the influence of music

Literature searching through standard databases of published material reveals a large body of work on the subject of music and young people from a somewhat narrowly defined psychiatric and psychological perspective. Indeed, this is a dominant lens through which young people and heavy metal music have been understood not only by researchers but also from the point of view of policymakers, advocacy groups and health professionals. The tendency to view heavy metal and its fans as somehow vulnerable, or socially and morally compromised, has thus received ample support from researchers and clinicians. There is a great deal of literature, both research-based clinical work (often using clinical samples of young people who experience self harm) and more generic literature, which purports to show these relationships, so we present only a sampler of the views and findings here, which will show the tenor of this work.

Hansen and Hansen (1991) describe heavy metal fans as being more Machiavellian, less needful of cognition, more likely to show machismo, and likely to make higher estimates of antisocial behaviour among the population as a whole than non-fans. Roberts et al., agree that heavy metal music preference in adolescents, when *combined* with higher levels of negative emotions, can result in increased risk-taking behaviour. Heavy metal fans are described as lower in educational attainment and subscribing to a genre disliked by even educated, broadminded music fans by Bryson (1996). Martin et al. (1993) describe how preferences for heavy metal music in adolescent males represent a significant risk factor for self-harm, depression, delinquency drug taking, and suicidal thoughts—echoing points made by Scheel & Westfeld (1999) and Lacourse et al. (1999, 332–323). Lacourse et al. provide a useful summary of research exploring the causal links between heavy metal music preference and suicidal tendencies as well as research which finds opposing results, concluding with some fairly contradictory results of their own. Similarly, Arnett emphatically supports and illuminates the relationship between heavy metal music taste and recklessness in adolescence in his book length study *Metal Heads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation* (1996). He suggests:

> In the lives and words of the metalheads, a considerable amount of disorientation and disillusionment is evident […] Some of them are the losers in a system of broad socialisation, and they are seriously off track with their lives. Others are in fact doing reasonably well and are likely to go on to be reasonably successful members of American society in the love and work of their lives. But even for many of the boys who are doing reasonably well there is an element of confusion and anxiety in them, of alienation, over modern life. It is this alienation to which heavy metal music gives fierce and undiluted expression. (34)

Throughout the book, Arnett weaves his own interpretations of the adolescents he studies with 'case narratives' which detail the factors and behaviours involved in the boys' chaotic, delinquent, law-breaking existences. However he does not comment in any depth on the *positive* elements the young males frequently report in their own words—the increase or uplift in mood, the cathartic impact on anger and sadness, and connectivity and community in going to see bands play live. This is a point we return to below.

Similarly, negative reports about the relationship between heavy metal and self-harm or suicide can be seen in research which purports to find a relationship between Goth culture (sometimes conflated, particularly in popular media and controversially for the fans, with Emo culture) and suicide or self-harm. Rutledge et al. suggest that many "Goth teens are at risk for psychosocial problems such as depression, self-harm, suicide, and violence" (2006, 460). They continue, somewhat uncritically, to suggest that such "problems can either be inherent reasons the teen has sought to be part of the Goth subculture or be the result of participation within the culture. Regardless of the reason, their Goth-related activities place them at greater risk for psychosocial problems. Specific activities include the music they listen to, the rituals they participate in, the Web sites the visit, and the expected persona of the role" (460). Young et al. (2006), in a widely cited but problematic study, suggest that younger 'Goths' who heavily identify with this music and subculture have a lifetime risk of self-harm and attempted suicide of 53 and 47 % respectively. While this sounds alarming, it should be noted that these statistics are based on just eight out of 15 people who identified themselves as 'really or heavily' into the Goth music and culture, a tiny subset of people in a much larger survey based on one geographical area.

Young et al.'s work takes its place in a much larger raft of articles claiming a link between music preferences and adverse outcomes. For example, Mulder et al. (2007) discovered that rock fans among others exhibited more problem behaviour and thinking than fans of more mainstream music, the latter apparently offering a 'buffering' effect against problems. We found a conviction on the part of many authors (e. g. Schwartz and Fouts 2003) that somehow personality dimensions can be 'read off' from a young person's music tastes and that 'heavier' music tastes can be seen as indicative of developmental difficulties and personality problems. So pervasive was this assumption in the 1980s and 1990s that in the United States professional bodies such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (Committee on Communications, 1989) and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (Alessi et al. 1992) identified heavy metal music preferences as a risk factor for adolescent problems and a topic meriting questions in psychiatric assessments. Rather than being confined to fundamentalists concerned with dangerous subliminal messages and Satanic back-masking (Vokey and Read 1985), these concerns were for a time at the very heart of professional and intellectual life where popular music and young people were concerned. For example, body piercing and tattooing are often a kind of visual codification of belonging to a heavy metal subculture (though less so from the mid-1990s since the Spice Girls began to get inked and pierced). This too has attracted negative attention and is discussed in a sensationalising manner—Jeffreys, for example, writes "much of the client base of this mutilation industry is composed of the hundreds of thousands of troubled young people in western cultures who self-mutilate on a regular basis. The industry of self-mutilation prefers to term its practices 'body decoration,' 'body art' or 'body modification'" (2000, 409). With the benefit of hindsight and now that the origins of heavy metal have become part of the tourist and heritage industry in parts of the UK (see http://www.homeofmetal.com/), the more strident manifestations of this concern seem curiously outdated, yet it remains a persistent theme in clinical research literature and, in a more alarmist manner, in the media more generally.

Lest it be thought that we have been selective in our review of literature or that we have set up straw men, this kind of material is overwhelmingly what is returned in response to searches of databases of academic articles where terms like 'youth', 'music', 'rock', 'heavy metal' and the like are used. Yet there are a number of reasons why this genre of work on young people and music needs to be understood with caution. That is, a straightforward and oft-repeated connection between musical taste and psychopathology reflects only a part of the puzzle, and itself only emerges after a particular set of assumptions have been made. Chief among these is the problem of how we attribute causality. Does listening to heavy metal induce teens towards suicidality, self-harm, violence and all the other negative behaviours researched, or are teenagers with a propensity towards such areas drawn to heavy metal, accounting for some of the results found? Moreover, the academic research tends to lag behind the development of new cultures and musical styles. Thus, there is as yet little scholarship on so called 'emo' subcultures, for example. Much of what we have reviewed above relies on self-report measures of social or psychological pathology or wellbeing, self-report personality measures and self-report measures of cognitive or attitudinal factors. Not only are these measures subject to the vagaries of retrospective distortion and social desirability bias but they may also be 'role played' by respondents seeking to convey a particular sort of image or wishing to present a certain kind of stance to representatives of the adult world administering the study. Moreover, on the part of questionnaire authors, there are often strong normative assumptions about what the ideal pattern of responding should be. For example, Ellis (1998) shows how used questionnaires widely used to measure so-called 'self-esteem' are highly correlated with measures of conformity with the values of the adult world and the expectations of dominant groups. Thus, the debates are only partly about popular music and also about the collectively held image of children, what they should be, how they should look, how they should spend their leisure time and the proper set of aspirations to which they should adhere. This area is in great need of further research, not least to account for some of the potential limitations of the research cited here, as pointed out by McKinnon (2011).

In addition, it may well be that research documenting psychopathology, self-harm and suicide risk among youth listening to heavy metal music may capture just one element of a much more nuanced culture, and this same music may be protective. The frequently clinical focus and the tendency to draw samples of convenience from locations where self-harming young people present themselves (such as clinic samples) has meant that the automatic focus had tended to be on pathology, which may only partly represent the broader picture of what music means in context and which tends to consolidate the apparently naïve focus and ecologically fallacious conclusions of much of this work.

Cultures, subcultures and the neoliberal assault on youth

In contrast to the psychological and psychiatric characterisation of heavy metal fans, a rather different body of literature has focussed instead on the nature of young people's cultures and their position within broader social and economic relations. It is now nearly 40 years since Paul Willis's 'Learning to Labour' (1977) illustrated how oppositional behaviour in school was not merely indicative of children's problems but formed a coherent and meaningful culture on behalf of the youths involved. Moreover, it mimicked and prepared them for the kind of shop floor culture which they were likely to encounter later in the workplace. Since then a larger body of work has emerged on what it means to be a member of a particular youth subculture or what it means to be a fan of a particular kind of film, TV show or style of music. As Gray et al. (2007) remark, fandom was automatically more than the mere act of being a fan of something:

it was a collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities that in their subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings of the "power bloc" (Fiske 1989) represented by popular media. Fan style, likes and dislikes was 'associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age class and race' (Fiske 1992, 30) and therefore comprises a kind of political intervention.

As many cultural commentators on the genre of heavy metal have pointed out, the critique mounted by educators, health professionals and moral entrepreneurs is often misplaced (Bayer 2009; Purcell 2003). Instead, authors point to the genre's aesthetic complexity (Kahn-Harris 2007), its intertextuality with a variety of 20th century and earlier musical styles and motifs (Bayer 2009; Moore, 2001; Walser, 1993), its international reach (Wallach, Berger and Greene 2011) and its intersection with literary genres such as futuristic fiction and science fantasy (Weibe 2008; Weibe 2009). Moreover, as Weibe has elaborated, the music offers spaces for social critique and resistance to a variety of global trends which have a bearing on young people's situations.

Parallels to this can be seen in the work of political scientist James Scott (1990). In his germinal work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, he described what he calls 'hidden transcripts' for the critique of power which take place offstage away from the official 'public transcript' of the dialogue which goes on, in this case perhaps, between young people and parents, educators, state officials and health professionals. The friendship groups, fan subcultures and music lyrics themselves, inasmuch as they are exclusive to a particular social formation might well be considered to be a 'hidden transcript'. For Scott, the everyday resistance of what Gramsci called 'subalterns' indicates that they have not consented to dominance. Now the term 'hidden transcript' itself may seem an odd description for lyrics which are often freely available on album inserts and the internet, which are endorsed by large-scale music publishing organisations. But music involves the management and maintenance of social distinctions (Bryson 1996; Bourdieu 1984), such that what is enjoyed and appreciated in one subcultural enclave is disliked, reviled or ignored in another. There may be very little symbolic traffic between fan communities and the wider public or in the case of music fandom, between youth and the adult world. Where such leakage occurs it may occasion outrage on the part of policymakers, groups representing parents, educators or moral entrepreneurs who when they discover what their teenage children are listening to, playing, watching or reading. As Bourdieu says about taste in relation to social class, even when the subordinate classes may seem to have their own particular idea of good taste, "the working-class 'aesthetic' is a dominated 'aesthetic' which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics" (1984, 41).

So too with styles of music. Dominant interests arrange them in hierarchies of worth in terms of their putative effects on the listener and their aesthetic value. The picture is yet further complicated by artistes and fans appropriating and incorporating elements of this moral panic in a manner which Jenkins (1992) might describe as 'textual poaching'. This is well documented in several histories of not only heavy metal (Christie 2004) but also band biographies themselves, particularly for *Slipknot*, who we discuss below (McIver 2012; Arnopp 2001). The authors here similarly recall members of Deicide claiming to be 'possessed', Cradle of Filth using overtly provocative slogans such as 'Jesus is a c**t' on their merchandise, and Marilyn Manson's stage act including (fake) self-mutilation and an exaggerated mime of wiping his bottom on the American flag. Ozzy Osbourne, one of the originators of heavy metal, famously bit the head off a live bat (which he believed to be made of rubber) in 1982 (Arnopp 2001). Other bands attracted controversy inadvertently—Judas Priest and their record label famously faced a lawsuit after two young men, both Judas Priest fans, committed suicide allegedly after

becoming somehow entranced by the supposed subliminal messages contained within the lyrics—Judas Priest were cleared on all counts (Walser 1993, 145–147). Osbourne faced a similar lawsuit in 1985 (Wright 2000, 370–371). The music genre as a whole has been sensationally and often inaccurately linked to a range of public tragedies, not least the public vilification of Marilyn Manson and his apparent relationship to the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 (Wright 2000, 381–382). Similarly well-publicised accounts of tragedies (fans dying in crowd surges) and violence (rape and sexual assault in moshpits) at heavy metal gigs and festivals are also sensationally reported (Ambrose 2001)—yet, for the hundreds of thousands of gigs and festivals that occur globally each year, very few experience incidents anywhere near this severity. However, the potential for conflict is ramped up, and artistes and fans benefit from the publicity or notoriety. This meticulously choreographed moral panto-mime, with its moves and counter-moves, is then addressed by researchers from a range of clinical and academic institutions using self-report questionnaires (or 'instruments') to measure the fans' self-esteem, suicidal ideation, depression, attitudes to school achievement and the like.

It is unsurprising that they find 'evidence' of the social, economic and educational marginality of the young people they study. Understanding the situation in which young people find themselves and the distress they experience is particularly urgent, for as Henry Giroux has argued, global political and economic developments have pressed down on the younger generation particularly sharply. Giroux (2010) argues that, rather than being seen as a future in which to invest, young people are increasingly regarded by policymakers as a problem, a burden, a threat and as, in important ways, 'disposable'. Indeed, for Giroux (2012) young people are subject to a systematic and persistent failure on the part of politicians to invest in their future; increasingly draconian criminal justice regimes; marginal, insecure and poorly paid employment futures; and a growing sense that they are valuable only inasmuch as they can fulfil a role as consumers. Distress and difficulty then is not occasioned by being a fan of a particular music style, but rather by these broader structural patterns in worldwide economics and politics which Giroux and others have characterised as neoliberalism.

Heavy metal culture: life affirming?

Book-length collections have begun to take seriously heavy metal as a cultural phenomenon worthy of academic attention aside from the clinical research we have discussed above. Research from a broad range of interdisciplinary perspectives including literary studies, semiotics, sociology and psychology (Bayer 2009) and international cross-cultural perspectives (Wallach, Berger, and Greene 2011) is demonstrating the potential for new avenues of research into this diverse range of subcultures. For each research paper that suggests negative impacts on young people caused by listening to heavy metal music, there are opposing studies that indicate no, or *no more* negative, impacts, either when compared to more 'mainstream' musical tastes or as stand-alone studies. There is also contemporaneous works which take a more balanced approach to the research available. An example of this would be McKinnon's 2011 book chapter, exploring research from *both* perspectives and concluding, with suggestions relating to neuroscientific, psychoanalytic and psychological theories, that heavy metal may well be life-saving rather than life damaging. Lacourse et al. criticize a number of the studies we have cited above for taking a "mainly univariate approach to study the relations between heavy metal music and suicidal risk [...] these studies have neglected the possible impact of many other important variables on suicidal risk and behaviour" (2001, 329). Indeed, Lacourse et al. found in their study that, once other variables for suicide risk were included,

there was no increase in suicidal risk factors in adolescents, for both males and females, with a *reduction* in suicidal risk factors found for girls who used music for "vicarious release" (using music to dispel or relieve negative emotions) (2001, 330). Studies that purport to have found negative impacts can sometimes also fail to acknowledge work and research that suggests positive impacts of listening to heavy metal music and/or being part of that culture—Wooten (1992), for example, found that, as in Arnett's (1996) study, individuals who had musical preferences towards heavy metal music reported positive impacts to their moods after listening to it. More recently, Rowe (2011) argues that being part of a 'metal' culture may be an empowering experience for young people—though she also cautions that further research is needed to ascertain the benefits of subcultural membership, and whether it may marginalise these same youths from economic, developmental and citizenship opportunities (85). Work that focuses exclusively on the potentially negative impacts of heavy metal music engagement tends to not engage with the subculture itself, or with narrative accounts of the impact of listening to heavy metal. Those who do, such as Ambrose (2001), Weinstein (2000), Wright (2000) or Walser (1993) tend to be more sympathetic and to take a more integrative approach to heavy metal music, its culture, and the adolescents who are fans and members of such subcultures.

If we return to the words of the young men in Arnett's 1996 study, we can draw some tentative conclusions as to why young people may enjoy the elements of heavy metal songs which, undeniably, focus on the darker, sadder and more difficult sides of life. Arnett uses case examples throughout his book, and in almost all of these, young people talk of the *cathartic* impact of listening to heavy metal and of attending concerts: "The music is so powerful, it's so strong, it's real energizing […] You put the music on and it gets you in a better mood and gets you moving…It's real intense, real intense." ('Jack' in Arnett 1996, 2). And again:

> Scott and the other boys spoke of listening to the 'harder' metal (that is, angrier) when they were feeling especially intense anger. 'If I'm really ticked off, I would listen to more of the hard stuff. The hard stuff kind of calms me down. They're spitting out all these problems on the tape, so you figure yours aren't so bad.' And in spite of the hopeless, even nihilistic quality of the lyrics of most heavy metal songs, not one of the boys—not a single one—said that the songs make him hopeless or even sad. (Arnett 1996, 82).

As Arnett states, "heavy metal songs served the function of helping purge their destructive and self-destructive urges" (19). Evidently, when young people were spoken to in a qualitative interview, rather than being measured by scales, the findings are not only richer and more positive but indicate that heavy metal can provide a cathartic effect for negative emotions. Similarly, hearing other people's sometimes dire problems laid bare in lyrics can create a sense of perspective, unity, a feeling that others have been through similar or worse, and survived—Walser, for example, quotes musicians who hope that young people will realise they're not alone via the band's lyrics (1993, 150), and Hill (2011) comments upon the vociferously supportive words of the teenage fans of 'Emo' band My Chemical Romance when they were linked to the suicide of a young girl. In Hill's research, it seems from the fans' point of view that the music really *can* be life affirming, positive, cathartic—"My Chemical Romance fans find solace in the music when faced with unhappiness. Rather than emo being a fashion that pushes them towards feelings of desperation, into self-harming, to commit suicide, it can help fans survive mental ill health" (149).

Similar cathartic and community effects have been noted by those who attend heavy metal music concerts and gigs. At first glance, heavy metal concerts and gigs can seem violent, aggressive, dangerous. Yet within the 'pit' (the area where the most energetic 'moshing',

'headbanging' and 'slamdancing' occurs), negative emotions are discharged within an environment where violence is contained and codified (similar to sport in many respects—see Sinclair 2011). Equally importantly, a genuine solidarity bought about through the music can also be found: "The very presence of these dark dangers is what drives them in their and, conversely, gives them a comforting sense of belonging. In this sometimes hostile landscape, they have to look out for one another. There is more fraternity and harmony in the pit than outsiders can possibly imagine" (Ambrose 2001, 5). Sinclair (2011) suggests that, instead of the uncontrolled violence perceived by outsiders, heavy metal culture (moshpits and gigs in particular) "is an illustration of how the civilizing process works" (98). He discusses some of the internal codes of behaviour alongside external controls that are placed on the live music event, suggesting persuasively that the "public displays of emotions, the violence and aggression of the live heavy metal event do not represent a de-civilizing loss of control. They signify the development of a high level of self-restraint in an environment that is situated in a complex web of social situations and relationships […] the music and rituals of the subculture provides a cathartic effect for the fans" (98–99). Both the music itself, and the environment where it is played live, are therefore believed to effect a dramatic 'catharsis' for negative emotions. Even the notion of catharsis, however, undertheorises the social complexity of the feelings and what Hawes (1976) calls 'situated-logics-in-use' which obtain in these settings. Rather than seeing fans as containing an undifferentiated mass of negative emotion striving for release, it might be more productive in future research studies to consider in detail how emotional experiences and are formulated and narrated in situ by the participants and the role of music and group membership in shaping the way these experiences are described.

Slipknot—strength, suffering and survival

There is, as we have explored above, no compelling or detailed evidence that lyrics such as those which we move on to explore compel young people to self-harm or attempt suicide. It could equally be argued that these songs provide a *protective* element, allowing fans not only catharsis through music but also effecting a process of familiarisation whereby they may believe that others—not only others but others whom they deeply admire and use as role models—have potentially felt low, negative, desperate but *survived* and, not only survived, but used their struggle in a creative and successful manner. Of course, problems with lyrical interpretation abound, as in the interpretation of any textual form, not least when drawing on what may or may not be 'factual' biographical details and on a system of diagnosis that reduced complex, individual and unique human experiences into a series of checklists. This issue is particularly evident in a paper by Wilson and Thomas which aims to analyse songs that "*accurately* reflect mental health conditions" to see "whether this knowledge and insight are accurately depicted according to the medical diagnostic criteria as a result of the writer's personal experience of mental illness" (2011, 27). Our concern in looking at the lyrics of a selection of songs by popular heavy metal band *Slipknot* is not to draw on biographical mental health histories of the writers or performers nor to offer a definitive answer to 'what the song means'. Instead, we wish to consider a range of interpretations that may be available to listeners within the framework elaborated by Arnett, Ambrose, Weinstein and others above. Our three core points are: that heavy metal music provides shape and form to emotional experiences; that the lyrics themselves may reduce the sense of shame and isolation that many young people who self-harm report by promoting strength and survival; and that the songs and

concerts contribute to notions of community that surround heavy metal subcultures, providing sociality and solidarity.

Some heavy metal songs are notable for their direct engagement with self-harm and suicide in their lyrics. *Papa Roach*'s anthemic and hugely popular 'Last Resort', from the 2000 album *Infest*, for example, contains the verse:

> Would it be wrong, would it be right?
> If I took my life tonight?
> Chances are that I might
> Mutilation out of sight
> And I'm contemplating suicide.

It is certainly not a cheerful song, but not only does it engage with the notion of self-harm being a hidden, secret, shameful activity ('Mutilation out of sight'), as we have suggested above, acknowledgement of self-harm and suicidality in a popular metal song may provide a sense of relief, catharsis and positive identification that a heavy metal idol can acknowledge such thoughts, experiences and feelings in a public forum. The concerns expressed by representatives of the adult world at young people listening to such material contrast oddly with the educational quality attributed to similar depictions elsewhere—Shakespeare's Juliet or Lady Macbeth may be presented to the very same young people in their literature classes, as might the self-inflicted deaths of Aegeus and Ajax in Greek mythology. Concerns about this kind of thing in popular music then do not so much reflect the *topic* of the material but rather *context* and the perceived dangers of the topic being dealt with in a popular, unregulated form outside a formal pedagogic context. Whilst concerns might be expressed at the representation of self-injury in popular music, once again, the activities alluded to have a long and considerably less controversial history as motifs in literature. As Chaney (2011) points out, the novels of Poe heralded a 19th century preoccupation with self-mutilation on the part of writers of fiction.

Here too then, the problem seems to be not so much the act itself but the fact that it is represented in a popular context. Also in the field of heavy metal, Swedish band *In Flames*, on their eighth album *Come Clarity*, refer to self-harm in songs such as 'Take This Life' and 'Our Infinite Struggle'. The first of these two songs contains the opening lines:

> It's not so much the pain,
> It's more the actual knife.
> Pretending the picture is perfect,
> I cut myself to sleep.

Later in the same song, however, the lines 'Make me understand the thought whatever/Make me see/Make me be/Make me understand you're there for me', far from inciting self-harm, suicide or even isolation, seem to be asking for help as they're screamed by the lead singer. *In Flames*' 'Our Infinite Struggle' could be read as a song about a broken love affair, a plea from an angry adolescent towards their parents, or an acknowledgement of life's adversity. Similarly, US heavy metal band *Trivium*'s second album, *Ascendancy*, contains overt concern with suicidality (particularly in the song 'Departure' which contains the lines 'Razors kiss the vein/overdose for pain/A 12 gauge cross to the forehead/A saviour in a shell') but also songs which fans—and non-fans—report finding immense hope from. In personal correspondence with one author, an individual talks of the song 'Dying in Your Arms' from the same

Trivium album as being part of her saviour from anorexia. The opening verse acted here as a literal feminised personification of anorexia:

> I'm wearing thin, wearing out, becoming weak
> Holding hands with this rope
> She's my self-destructive,
> bleeding disease

In that respect then, it could be said that *In Flames* and *Trivium* are addressing the kinds of issues which surround self-injury in the poetry of Sylvia Plath or Joyce Carol Oates. That is, that they have to do with human emotions and struggles, with the difficulty of human relationships or romances, and the sense of isolation which these may often bring about. It should also be noted that popular heavy metal bands do also directly engage with suicide prevention in their videos and lyrics. *Five Finger Death Punch*, another US band, in their song and accompanying video 'Coming Down' (*American Capitalist* 2011), include the expression of suicidality, anger, survival, strength and recovery from crisis in their lyrics, but in their video which depicts two suicidal teenagers making final preparations for suicide, they are discovered by friends and parents and 'rescued'. The video ends with the line, 'One Friend Can Save A Life', and the telephone number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the US.

One band that has faced criticism for being angry, nihilistic, violent, sickening and damaging to young people is American heavy metal band, *Slipknot*. The nine masked members worked, by all accounts, incredibly hard to create a sound that would challenge the eardrums of any listener, and their on-stage antics led to much notoriety in a very short space of time. They now have four widely available and popular albums of original material, a range of DVD's and live material available, and several other bands that members have formed or reformed, such as lead singer Corey Taylor's *Stone Sour* and drummer Joey Jordison's *Murderdolls* (Arnopp 2001; McIver 2012). Their first album, *Slipknot*, has been described by critics as a barrage of relentless aggression, phenomenal from a musical perspective due, in part, to their mix of three people on percussion and a DJ and Sampler, instead of a more traditional singer-drummer-guitarist-bassist set up. As McIver states, this album is "reactive and unapologetic" whereby "even the songs that don't deal directly with violence are still concerned with hurt or harm in some form or another" (2012, 93). Songs such as 'Wait And Bleed', 'Surfacing' and 'Spit It Out' have become classics in the metal genre. 'Surfacing' in particular cannot be read as anything other than confrontational—but this does not necessarily mean it is a negative song, as McIver points out, referring specifically to the chorus and to the repeated line "I am the push that makes you move": "It can be read as a promise that *Slipknot* will change the listener's life for the better; a rebellious self-identification by Taylor; or simply a general warning to back off" (2012, 86). There is unfortunately not the space in this discussion to address more than a small minority of their back catalogue or to perform a more formal content or thematic analysis of all their songs. But two songs in particular— 'Wait And Bleed' from their first 1999 album, and 'Duality' from their third original music album *Vol 3. (The Subliminal Verses)* in 2004—will be discussed here.

A complicated song lyrically, 'Wait and Bleed' opens with lines that seem to indicate the 'I' in the song is possibly attempting or planning suicide (McIver 2012, 86): "I wander out where you can't see/Inside my shell I wait and bleed/Goodbye!". The 'I' is similarly uncertain and unsure about what has led to this position—"I can't control my shakes/How the hell did I get here?" and "Is it a dream or a memory?" indicating a questioning about the position—suicidal

or in terms of life more generally is unclear—that they find themselves in. The tone of the song then turns more aggressive—"Get outta my head cuz I don't need this/Why didn't I see this?/ I'm a victim"—and a change in perspective, from hurting the self to turning the anger outwards towards others. The sinister closing lines are certainly not a clear laying down and waiting for death but a thinly veiled threat. This turn in tone—from inward pain to outward anger—could indicate a strength, a resolve, a resolution not to be beaten. Moreover, it resonates with Francis Bacon's 1627 essay *On Anger* (1972). The sense of oneself as an injured party, the sense that one is held in contempt by others and the sense of injury to one's reputation as a good and moral individual are common to the work of both Bacon and *Slipknot*. Thus contemporary music is drawing upon and making sense of emotions through much older cultural tropes. Yet it would be hard to find critics prepared to argue that Francis Bacon induces suicidality and self-harm. Once again, where this controversy is concerned, the role of context is overwhelming.

Like 'Wait and Bleed', 'Duality' discusses notions of pain both existential and circumstantial throughout. Opening with a slow, rumbling and cold tone from Taylor:

(I push my fingers into my) eyes
It's the only thing that slowly stops the ache
That's made of all the things I have to take

The line ends on a roar from Taylor, and the music erupts. The last line is repeated throughout the chorus with the addition of "I'm not gonna make it!", echoing the theme of being on a precipice of life and death, survival and suicide as in 'Wait and Bleed'. Yet again here, the pain can be interpreted as being transformed into anger and turned outwards in parts, towards unspecified others: "You cannot kill what you did not create/I've gotta say what I've gotta say/ And then I swear I'll go away/But I can't promise you'll enjoy the noise". A tone of survival can be seen in the opening line of this section, with again a promise that what is about to come may not be what the listener wants to hear. But it is not only the individual who is suffering in this song. The accompanying video for 'Duality' demonstrates a clear theme of strength and survival within a specific community of fans and followers of the band with the group leading the cohesion and acknowledging the challenging and negative experiences of themselves and their fans. Thus, it resembles Labov and Waletzky's (1967) account of narratives where the protagonists pass through complicating events towards a resolution, once again a well-established motif in many of the world's stories.

On the one hand, *Slipknot*'s lyrics seem to promote a radical individualism, whereby nothing and no one can be relied on—particularly in their more aggressive tracks, such as 'Surfacing' on the album 'Slipknot'. On the other, there is an enormously strong *Slipknot* community—having been to several *Slipknot* concerns, one of us (CB) can attest to the sense of cohesion and support that abounds there, as suggested by Ambrose (2001). Could it be that *Slipknot* appeals to, and taps into, a disenfranchised, disaffected population yet provides them with rousing calls for action rather than nihilism and despair? As Corey Taylor states—a theme echoed many times by several band members (Arnopp 2001; McIver 2012)—"I've always tried to blend the darkness with a big dose of positivity. With our imagery, it obviously gets a bit lost. But for me it's always been about giving people a reason to live, rather than a reason to give up" (Taylor cited in McIver 2012, 178). Again, as Taylor stated to music magazine and website *New Musical Express (NME)*, "If you're setting out to hurt yourself, it's not the music that's causing it […] There's something else wrong. We get a lot of kids that cut themselves but I go out of my way to try and stop it" (*NME* 2009). At the very least, Taylor—and heavy metal music itself—is aware of and engages with the complex issues around self-harm instead of minimizing it or paradoxically invoking a media driven moral panic around it. As has been

argued by folklorists and anthropologists such as Vladimir Propp (1958) or Claude Levi-Strauss (1963), there are patterns in stories which make sense of the world in the face of uncertainty, formulate, manage and explain tensions and oppositions, and help construct and reconstruct the kinds of relationships enjoyed by the tellers and hearers.

As we have argued in the introduction, a more culturally and subculturally aware analysis of what heavy metal means to fans and artistes suggests a more complex and nuanced relationship with distress than has typically been proposed in the psychological and psychiatric literature. Walser's 1993 study, for example, refutes the assumptive claim that heavy metal is not really *music* but violent, senseless noise through a detailed, informed and informative discussion of development of the musical genre, the history of the music, the influence of classical music, issues of gender, and a look at some of the controversies that have contributed to the reputation of heavy metal as violent, malevolent or dangerous. On the subject of suicide, self-harm and heavy metal Walser states persuasively:

> Even when it models musical despair, heavy metal confronts issues that cannot simply be dismissed or repressed, and it positions listeners as members of a community of fans, making them feels that they belong to a group that does not regulate them.
> The vast majority of heavy metal fans don't worship Satan and don't commit suicide; yet many fans enjoy that fraction of heavy metal songs that deal with such things. Heavy metal's critics have provided no credible explanations for this, for they deny the fans the agency that is necessary for attraction to exist, preferring to believe that such images are inflicted rather than sought (151).

Similarly, Wright (2000) thoughtfully and not uncritically traces the history of suicide as a lyrical theme in popular music, drawing upon contemporary clinical research into youth suicide to illuminate that blaming "this horrific increase in teen suicide on 'explicit' and 'destructive' themes in rock music may accord well with the ideological premises of neoconservatism" and confirming "*there is nothing in the clinical evidence to support any such link*" (372—emphasis in the original). Before moving on to explore Marilyn Manson, Wright suggests "if all the 'dark' elements in Western music came under scrutiny, they would inevitably have to censor everyone from Wagner (for being Hitler's favourite composer) and the *Jaws* theme (for causing hydrophobia), to the Beatles (for inspiring the Manson murders) and Barry Manilow (for causing the social isolation, self-pity and delusional tendencies his fans have been known to evince" (374). His tone may appear ironic—his point, less so.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have attempted to briefly summarise two contradictory bodies of research—that which hails heavy metal as damaging, destructive and even life-threatening to young fans and that which focuses on the positive, protective elements of the music and its subcultures. A preoccupation with the supposed harms of popular music deflects attention to the way in which, as Giroux (2010; 2012) argues, young people are placed in crisis as a result of national and international policy. Education has become narrowly focussed on occupational training and employability skills, the justice system becomes a means for the supervision and containment of youth, and the disinvestment in their future has yielded a pervasive pessimism in young people, even those who appear to be succeeding. Therefore it is important to appreciate the overall context within which youths may become angry or distressed, rather than focus exclusively on negative aspects of their current leisure pursuits.

Of course, our own experiences will colour our position here—as stated, one of us (CB) is an ardent heavy metal enthusiast, with 16 years of gig experience and an extensive iPod collection. Yet this paper emerged in part from CB's dissatisfaction with the research literature in this field and the assertions contained within such research, which are not borne out by the clinical literature and research into self-harm and suicide more generally. As a heavy metal enthusiast, CB has lived, enjoyed, experienced and survived (mostly) the cultures (she apparently has wide-ranging tastes, from grindcore to goth to emo to industrial to melodic death metal to popular metal and so on), gigs, moshpits, and, primarily the music itself. She has also witnessed a range of young people at gigs, nightclubs and festivals who self-harm and who display their scars—and, more worryingly, a range of others who hide their scars, shame-faced and stigmatised. The other of us, BB has been interested in supposedly subversive musical styles and subcultures for around 30 years, enjoying and examining live performances, recorded music, scenes and cultures with particular interest in those who have flaunted their credentials as grunge, Goth, heavy metal or industrial fans or artistes. He's especially interested in the role of music and subculture in making sense of the human condition and the cultural and social capital that fans derive from their involvement.

Wright articulates the problems inherent within the troubled relationship young people have with self-harm and heavy metal music well:

> As for the insidious claim that rock music causes teen suicide, here, too, it would seem that the 1980s-era censorship lobby has prevailed, subtly recasting its own baseless hysteria into the popular psychology of the 1990s. That some troubled youths have taken comfort in the 'darker' forms of rock music is indisputable—just as music lovers of all ages find consolation in the music that seems to articulate their losses, their pain and their grief. But the clinical evidence of teen suicide confirms what common sense has suggested from the outset: that young people's sometimes obsessive identification with violent themes in rock music is, if anything, symptomatic of deeper and far more profound social and psychic dislocation in their lives. That the advocates of censorship continue to confuse a passion for 'dark' music with a disposition to suicide is a measure not only of their ideological tenacity but—even more pitifully—of a more generalised refusal to admit that the lives of young people are highly stressful, and that their problems truly have become *critical* (2000, 381).

Where there is a paucity of research that is nuanced-speaking to younger heavy metal fans on their own terms, in their own way, and using their own words, Arnett's study over 15 years ago goes some way to contributing to the literature. But as the Emo trend continues to gain momentum within heavy metal subcultures and moral alarm grows with each new 'report' into the trend, there is a pressing need to re-pose the often naïve question of whether there is a relationship between heavy metal, self-harm and suicide. Equally important, research could usefully explore the psychosocial benefits as well as the drawbacks of belonging to different types of heavy metal subculture and listening to the music. A change needs to occur in the foci of research into self-harm and music preferences in young people—one which does not select only those youth who have come to the attention of clinicians but also examines youth subcultures and their individual vulnerabilities and strengths from a more diverse perspective. When we can listen to and with heavy metal music fans through ethnographic narrative research, for example, we may begin to find solutions to this fiercely contested debate. This solution could lead to more creative ways forward with

young people who self-harm whatever their musical preference—and at the very least, decrease the stereotyping and stigma associated with the heavy metal music culture.

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