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The Psychology of Heavy Metal Communities and White Supremacy

Dave Snell and Darrin Hodgetts
Psychology, University of Waikato, NZ

Abstract
Racism exists today. It is often perpetuated through the use of a variety of musical, broadcast, print and new media forms. Such media use allows white supremacist groups to promote their messages of intolerance, recruit new members and to maintain a sense of identity and cohesion. With such practices in mind, this paper explores the appropriation of aspects of Heavy Metal subcultures by white supremacists. Due to their marginal positioning in society, Heavy Metal communities are particularly susceptible to infiltration by white supremacist groups and therefore worthy of consideration. We conclude by considering the media as symbolic terrain for contesting racism and challenging white supremacist views.

Introduction
Heavy Metal musicians are often positioned as counter productive members of society who encourage drug and alcohol abuse, incite violence and promote suicide. Related public discourse relies on stereotypes of Heavy Metal fans as socially devoid and dysfunctional "weirdoes", "loners" or "violent thugs". Clearly these are over-generalisations because various groups and individuals have diverse uses for this form of music. Various alienated and disaffected groups use Heavy Metal to express affiliation with others and to voice feelings of anger and frustration with inequitable social structures (Walser, 1993). Among many such groups a psychological sense of community (PSOC) can be centered on Heavy Metal music and form the basis of collective identity, group cohesion and community participation. These factors have been associated with healthy social functioning for young people (Schott and Hodgetts, 2005). Unfortunately the use of Heavy Metal music and its associated symbolism is also associated with unsavory political agendas including white supremacy. This paper explores the way in which the sense of communal participation in the Heavy Metal community is often targeted by white supremacy groups as sights for recruitment.

In no way are we proposing that the majority of Heavy Metal fans are racist. We are proposing that because they may share musical tastes with some white supremacists that their overlapping interests may be used as a basis for the promotion of racist views among "Metallers".

A psychological sense of community
In their article 'Psychological Sense of Community' McMillan and Chavis (1986, 9) talk about a sense of community being: "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members needs will be met through the commitment to be together". Research has revealed a strong PSOC amongst fans of various forms of media, which bridge geographical boundaries via interactive media (Obst et al , 2002). Studies have also shown that a PSOC not only brings people together, but can also create margins, borders and exclusionary practices (Drevdahl, 2002). One might conceptualise the Heavy Metal community as a border community with a strong sense of belonging that is located in opposition to mainstream society (compare Walser, 1993). By definition border communities are relational "places where community members are seen as different (and deficient)" to mainstream society (Drevdahl, 2002).

For instance, when confronting controversial issues, such as suicide or family conflict, Heavy Metal lyrics often position listeners as members of a border community who experience unity through their alienation and social exclusion. Lyrics such as Slipknot's "Pulse of the Maggots" clearly illustrate this because the term "maggots" is used to refer to the band's fan club as social outcasts by the fan club itself. There is pride in marginality. Lyrics from the song include:

> This isn't the way just to be a martyr. I can't, walk alone any longer. I fight, for the ones that can't fight. And if I lose, at least I tried. We, we are the new diabolic. We, we are the bitter bucolic. If I have to give my life you can have it. We, we are the pulse of the maggots. Do you understand? (Yes), Say it again say it again (we won't die). (Slipknot: Pulse of the Maggots).

Such lyrics illustrate the sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself; positioned on the borders of society. With the establishment of themselves as border communities, Heavy Metal bands often foster an "us" versus "them" distinction. The in-group or "us" are the Heavy Metallers and the out-group or "them" are more "conservative" members of society (Baron et al, 1993). This opposition leads to misunderstandings and a lack of dialogue between Heavy Metal community members and members of the wider public, such as parental groups and health professionals. These groups often rely on contextually devoid and supposedly literal interpretations of lyrics and often ignore the subtleness of subcultural processes and meanings; for instance in this case taking the phrase "*If I have to give my life you can have it*" to mean suicide rather than dedication to the group. As Walser (1993, 31) writes, "Music doesn't make meanings, people do" through their consumption and interpretive practices.

Concerns regarding the negative impact of such songs on individuals and society are not new. These have occupied commentators since the use of sculpture and theatre for political purposes in antiquity.

They have accompanied the proliferation of print and broadcast forms in more recent times (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1998; Welch, 1999) . Heavy Metal music is repeatedly pathologised as a corrupting influence on the values of our youth . Rather than dismiss this media form we need to consider the social practices and relationships through which it is adopted and used in everyday life (Hodgetts, Bolam and Stephens, 2005). In fact psychologists are increasingly interested in the positive benefits of the virtual or online communities that form around the consumption of traditionally pathologised media forms such as fringe music and video games (Schott and Hodgetts, 2005). Beyond the individualistic pleasures that come from the consumption of Heavy Metal music we need to realise that such music can also provide a focus for communal online and offline fan practices. The fact that people are not seeking social isolation but rather social participation is evident in a mass of chat rooms and fan sites. Communal practices are often evident in shared rituals such as concerts and associated symbolism, which takes many forms including the production of band shirts, fan magazines and artwork such as banners and tattoos. These symbols also serve the purpose of expressing membership and fostering a sense of belonging (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

A skeptical reader might question whether it is appropriate to propose that people engaged with Heavy Metal music and associated fan practices actually comprise a community. We must concede that the concept of community is notoriously difficult to define. Without exploring the origins of this concept in sociological theory and notions of idealised rural centers in which people are linked through kinship and common beliefs (Bess, Fisher, Sonn and Bishop, 2002), we would emphasise a relational notion of community. Such a community is comprised of a group of people who participate in particular shared activities such as listening and discussing music. Their interactions create a socially constructed space within which common understandings, ritualistic practices; expertise, skills, knowledge and the negotiation of a shared identity are cultivated. Through the enactment of rituals including the sharing of information, the knowledge of related and often obscure facts and mentoring between novices and experts, group members (re)produce social relations and become embedded within a specific community of practice (Wenger, 1998) . This is evident in the mass of discussion, fan-art and the countless discussion

threads devoted to deconstructing the minutiae of songs, symbols and concerts that is evident on the Internet. It is important to note that these shared symbols and sites are polysemic and therefore open to use by other border communities. For instance, if white supremacists groups are able to turn this "us" versus "them" to something outside of music and direct it at minority groups some of this anger will be targeted, with the potential for very nasty results.

White supremacy and Heavy Metal

White supremacists can also be conceptualised as a border community that shares overlapping boundaries with the Heavy Metal community. In fact racist skinheads, as we know today, emerged from the punk movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which developed symbolism including shaved heads, band shirts, and tattoos. Some skinhead groups took the oppositional sense of community and "us" and "them" distinctions further to include only European ethnicities and excluding all others (Kersten, 1998). In the late 1970s several punk bands began to openly promote fascist symbols and lyrics and to make links with white supremacist groups who used the emerging symbolism to attract disenfranchised youth to the extreme right of the political spectrum.

As recent media reports illustrate (Binning 2004; Gardiner 2004), these links are not limited to Europe, Africa and North America. In New Zealand this white supremacy has found expression through the National Front, an organisation in New Zealand that has positioned itself as supposedly representing European New Zealanders at "the Front line of European Colonists in this Nation". According to the National Secretary their aim "…is New Zealand's mere survival as an outpost of European civilisation rather than as the Third World anti-heap outpost of Asia which the global capitalists aim for" (www.nationalfront.org.nz). This clearly states their assumptions of the history of New Zealand and puts the firm emphasis on the colonists to this country's well being, rather than any consideration for Maori or immigrants to New Zealand. This is also expressed by their strong Anti-Asian stance – they see Asians as a "major threat to European culture". Any immigrants to New Zealand from a non-European culture will be denied and any current immigrants in New Zealand will be "encouraged" to leave. Even if this does not mean violence, it could mean oppressive legislation such as extra taxes or race-based social and employment policies. Their policies state that "any culture that has values or beliefs that threaten a western way of life will be refused". This illustrates the "white is right" attitude. Links to Nazi ideals are evident on the "National Front Youth" website which lists "88 ways to get active" (www.nationalfrontyouth.tk). Listed in the 88 ways to get active is number 9 "Order sausage pizzas for your local rabbi".

The National Front's drive to recruit youth is evident in their support for Heavy Metal music groups such as Idvarp, which echoes past international interactions between Heavy Metal bands and white supremacy organisations. These interactions are worrying given the success of past propaganda efforts through public displays. White supremacist music groups can be seen in modern times to be reconstructing past Nazi methods of propaganda through the creation of the spectacles and distinct symbolism in order to promote unity (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992). In many of Hitler's speeches he made reference to Aryan mythology in order to foster a collective sense of ancestry and togetherness amongst the "white race". These elements were specifically targeted at the emotions of the people in order to foster a sense of patriotism (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992). These practices are echoed in white supremacist concerts. The public spectacle of the crowd, the adoption of Nazi symbols, and lyric references to specific Aryan myths identify Aryan people as timeless. Music is used to appeal to audience fears and emotions.

Examples of trends in the (mis)appropriation of media forms for fascist political purposes are numerous. The examples of bands including Skrewdriver, Burzum and Idvarp illustrate how influential and successful white supremacist groups have been in appropriating aspects of the Heavy Metal subculture. Skrewdriver started in 1975 when Ian Stuart formed a cover band called Tumbling Dice (Pearce, 1987). The band mainly played cover versions of songs by the Rolling Stones and The Who. By May 1977 the band changed their name to Skrewdriver and started to write their own Heavy Metal material. As well as the name change the band underwent a major image change, becoming a Skinhead band.

It was at one of their concerts that Stuart officially announced the change and firmly established Skrewdriver's political beliefs. They defined themselves as "Racial Nationalists". Stuart (Pearce 1987, 4) commented:

> In the end I just got fed up. It was obvious they were never going to praise us for anything, and in any case I couldn't see anything wrong with being a Nationalist, it was natural to me. That's when we thought we might as well go the whole way.

The press quickly labeled Skrewdriver fans as "Thugs" and "National Front Supporters," and then called upon Skrewdriver to denounce their patriotic followers, a request that was ignored (Pearce, 1987). Skrewdriver is still one of the most popular white supremacist groups, with a following of fans who do not necessarily share their political views. Their references to Aryan myths in their album covers and lyrics are typical of these types of bands. They include references to the "white race" as warriors, skinheads as martyrs for their people and in one song, a direct reference to African Americans as animals who are *"still throwing spears and living in mud huts"* (Skrewdriver: Voice of Evil). Lyrics about ancient battles and mythology are not new; the non-racist Heavy Metal band Iron Maiden in the 1980s made great use of it, but once it is recognised that Skrewdriver are "Racial Nationalists" the meaning becomes clearer: they signal ethnic conflict.

Varg Viikernes is the one man band known as Burzum. From Norway, the band plays predominantly what is known as Black Metal. Like other genres, Black Metal is very hard to categorise. Black Metal features fast and heavy guitars, double drumbeats and growling vocals. Black metal concentrates on the dark side of life. "Black Metal, by its very nature, has to deal with dark philosophies" (Metal Hammer, 1999). One of these dark philosophies is a fierce hatred of Christianity. In Norway this hatred came from the perception of Christianity as an unwanted and introduced belief that assimilated the original pagan beliefs of Norway. This hatred resulted in several church burnings being attributed to Viikernes, several other Black Metal music groups and Black Metal listeners. Their views were exploited by white supremacist groups in the United States. American white supremacists placed advertisements in Norwegian Heavy Metal magazines, and one of their most notorious white supremacist Heavy Metal groups changed their image to Black Metal by letting their hair grow long and wearing predominantly outfits made of leather and metal spikes. Through this, Norwegian Black Metal groups such as Burzum were told that not only was Christianity a foreign idea threatening their way of life but so were all the other cultures, beliefs and people from other countries that were in Norway.

Viikernes is widely considered to be the founder of National Socialist Black Metal (Turn it Down, 1995). He regularly encourages followers to "Listen to the voice of your blood; throw alien beliefs away," and emphasises the 'need' for racial and ethnic cleansing. Viikernes was also viewed as an apprentice to Jan Erik Kvamsdal, a leading political figure of the Norwegian National Socialist movement, who for several years took the role of his tutor. Kvamsdal is a renowned anti-Semite and one of the more shadowy neo-Nazi leaders with global white supremacist contacts (Turn it down, 1995). Viikernes is now the leader of the Norwegian Heathen Front, which offers information to people about a wide range of related topics including historical revisionism. These two examples illustrates how existing sub-cultures can be encouraged to adopt white supremacist views through the creative use of a variety of media forms consumed by fans to engage in a border community.

Such appropriation is also evident in New Zealand. Idvarp are a "Pagan metal" band formed in Palmerston North in 1999 and supported as a show piece by the National Front. There are regular discussions about the band on the National Front website's forum. There are several aspects of this band that provide worrying signs of these white supremacist attempts to tap into the local Heavy Metal community. Like Burzum, Idvarp has connections with record labels in the United States, such as Graveless Slumber in North Carolina (http://www.freewebs.com/gsr666/idbio.html). They also share striking similarities with Skrewdriver with lyrics containing references to Nordic mythology and ancient battles continuing through to recent times. The ambiguity of these lyrics makes discourse analysis even more problematic then is usually the case with musical texts.

For instance:

> In these days of increasing chaos, We enter the cycle of death, The foreign religions, And Christianised faiths, These cultural diseases, That plague our race, Ancient heathen ways, Have been scorned, Our ancestor's faiths, Will be restored, The blade of destruction, we wield, Devastation our foes shall feel (Idvarp: Cycle of Death).

Like the previous two bands, the importance of context in relation to Heavy Metal lyrics becomes evident when considering the motivation of Idvarp. Once the context of racial conflict and the ideologies of bands are known, the lyrics become less ambiguous and motives become clearer. But more importantly they show what results from the manipulation of music and other associated media. Music that was originally meant to relieve and combat social struggles through developing a sense of community can be manipulated and result in the harming of other marginalised groups.

Global activism and the internet

Given that the media is being used to cultivate racist views amongst the Heavy Metal community, an appropriate question is what strategies there might be to challenge white supremacist views. One possible answer is to use similar methods as white supremacist groups and appropriate music based media to promote non-racist views. An example of this is the Heavy Metal band Napalm Death. Barney Frank, lead singer of Napalm Death, promotes non-racist views lyrically and through interviews where he encourages fans to boycott white supremacist labels and sellers of white supremacist music and attend benefit concerts.

In interviews he also uses the analogy of prejudice towards Heavy Metal listeners and compares this with prejudice towards ethnic groups:

> Use your common sense. Look at what is going on around you. Just think. If there is a long-haired metal guy out there in a band, think of him going to a show where there are boneheads [*a term used to describe racist skinheads*]. Imagine walking in and there are tons and tons of boneheads, and just imagine the hassle you are going to get. And now put that into other people's worlds. Put that, say, into a regular Joe Chinese guy's life. A Chinese kid who goes to shows and buys your CD's. Use your common sense. You don't want boneheads at your shows. (Turn it Down 1995)

The use of new media forms can also be used to challenge white supremacist views. With the invention of the Internet came new activist networks which use websites, list servers and chat rooms for general communication and to coordinate activities in order to challenge the political activities advocated by groups such as the National Front (Hill and Hughes, 1998). Internet sites are used to establish and maintain "cells" of activists and organic networks of previously isolated groups that can connect to one another and coordinate their efforts (Meikle, 2002; Bennett, 2003). In sum, these global community structures have meant that ordinary people combined with high quality information can converge to create web-based networks where information can be exchanged and actions planned (Illia, 2003). Even if web pages are still available that represent organisations that are no longer functional, they often provide links to other organisations, motivation to find other organisations or just promote awareness of the topic (Bennett 2003). Web-based activism brings fast communication, organisation and recruitment opportunities for participation in rallies and local protests (Bennett, 2003). There is a definite need for this to happen for anti-racism initiatives, as white supremacists are already utilising the Internet for similar purposes.

An example of the use of new media to raise awareness and mobilise community action was a protest against the National Front. Protestors used the Internet to devise a strategy for challenging a National Front protest against increased trade with China. This included using the theme song to Dads Army ("Who do you think you are kidding Mr Hitler?") to trivialize, humiliate and ultimately drive off protesting skinheads (Aotearoa Independent Media Centre, 2004). Here is an example of an effective, non-violent and culturally specific way of challenging white supremacy, which utilizes a variety of media from websites to television and then to music in

order to attract the attention of broadcast and print outlets and thus transmit the impact of this symbolic act beyond the physical pace of the protest action (http//indymedia.org.nz).

Conclusions

Although a comprehensive research literature is not yet available, it is increasingly accepted that people engaging in communities with high levels of social capital or grassroots involvement and mutual support tend to be more healthy (Schott and Hodgetts, 2005). The cultivation of shared identities, trust, mutual support and shared interests are central to fostering participation in practices that can enhance health. In this paper we have explored the Heavy Metal subculture as a border community that positions itself in relation to mainstream society and in doing so fosters a strong sense of identity and community. Despite widespread speculation regarding the consequences of Heavy Metal music, research in this area is still in its early stages (Dunn, 2004; Walser, 1993). Missing are in-depth investigations of why people listen to Heavy Metal music and how listening to this genre of music may form the basis for communities spanning both online and offline settings. At the very least research in this area requires a balanced agenda focusing on both the negative and positive health consequences of Heavy Metal music. Knowledge of such communities of practice is important for understanding relationships between individuals and society, and developing ways of working with young people in order to further enhance health. While we would advocate legitimating such communities, we must explore their exploitation for racist ends. This involves considering wider social and political contexts in which Heavy Metal music is situated. This led us to discuss how white supremacist groups have exploited the symbols and PSOC associated with Heavy Metal in order to introduce their beliefs to prospective members. We have also considered how music and the Internet can be used to develop and maintain networks opposed to racism and to organise protests. Further research is required.

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