The Psychology of Metal Music, Culture, and Dis/Ability
Kyle J. Messick, Psychology Department, Ivy Tech
ORCID:0000-0002-0452-0922

Abstract:

This chapter explores the psychological functions that metal culture helps provide for community members with dis/abilities. Explanations are provided for how individuals with dis/abilities are able use metal culture as a potential source for mood and symptom maintenance, representation, social relatedness, a sense of belonging, and as an outlet for sharing their experiences. The underlining cultural and historical contextualization of dis/ability in rock, punk, and metal cultures is discussed, including depictions that could be considered exploitative, exaggerative, or inaccurate in order to understand the extent to which metal culture is inclusive towards people with dis/abilities. It is proposed that the embracing of societally taboo topics like dis/ability in heavy metal music and culture can serve a destigmatizing role towards the dis/abled, and when combined with an overlapping ‘outsider’ identity, it fosters a welcoming environment in metal culture for people with dis/abilities. This theoretical framework is applied through qualitative interviews with metal community members that have firsthand experience with dis/ability in metal.

Keywords: heavy metal, disability, psychological functions, social relatedness, belonging

Introduction

Heavy metal music and its associated culture have long been associated with deviance and non-conformity (Messick and Aranda 2020; Sinclair 2011; Snell and Hodgetts 2007; Lynxwiler and Gay 2000), but it isn’t as clear to what extent metal culture encompasses other social groups that similarly feel like societal outsiders. Metal culture prides itself on being inclusionary (Wray 2018; Everley 2016), although that is more of an ideal than an objective reality, since despite the culture becoming more inclusionary since its inception in the 1960s, biases still exist that have prevented women (Heesch and Scott 2016), individuals of some religions (Moberg 2012; Hecker 2005; Kartheus 2015), and non-white metal fans (Dawes 2012) from being treated equally in metal contexts. The aforementioned categories of individuals have received increasing attention in both academic and popular literature, but there is yet another category that metal culture encompasses that has received less attention: metal fans with dis/abilities. Consistent with Goodley (2018), this chapter uses the term ‘dis/ability’ to refer to a broad range of disabilities and disorders because it acknowledges the duality of these conditions, and it avoids potentially ableist associations.

The focus of this chapter is to explore the inclusivity of metal culture in terms of the acceptance and depiction of individuals with dis/abilities. This includes understanding how widespread dis/ability is among metal fans, understanding the role of stigma, how dis/ability has been historically contextualized in metal culture, and then what psychological functions are

fulfilled that make metal culture an appealing place for membership for the dis/abled. What is included here is largely preliminary theoretical work based on existing trends and evidence, which are substantiated further by the inclusion of qualitative data in the form of two interviews with members of the metal community with firsthand experience. The first thing to note is that this chapter speaks of dis/abilities in broad strokes, so although there is overlap across people of differing life experiences, further nuance is needed when speaking of individual dis/abilities and experiences.

This chapter focuses on the experience of metal music community members that live with physical, developmental, learning, and/or emotional dis/abilities, including prevalent mental health concerns. One of the areas that this chapter does not focus on is addiction, but that is certainly another area that deserves attention, as addiction can be similarly debilitating, but the relationship between heavy metal and drug abuse is more convoluted. What is excluded extends to the potential addictive qualities of metal music consumption itself, as these behaviors are also prone to compulsivity, as was the case of Roger Tullgren (Cooper 2015). Group dynamics are explored for individuals with dis/abilities within metal culture alongside the psychological outcomes of those relationships, however, music can be applied in other ways for individuals with dis/abilities too, such as when music therapies are used to increase positive affect, competency, control, and motivation for individuals with learning dis/abilities (Soltani et al. 2012).

The main line of argumentation in this chapter builds off the work of Messick, Aranda, and Day (2020), who conducted a series of interviews with individuals about their experiences as metal music fans that had diagnosed mental health conditions and/or developmental disorders. This chapter outlines some possible psychological functions that metal culture can provide for members with dis/abilities, including mood and symptom maintenance, representation, social relatedness, a sense of belonging, and as an outlet for sharing experiences.

Prevalence of dis/ability in metal

Images of metal fans with dis/abilities being embraced by metal culture have seen wide distribution in popular media, such as photos of metal fans in wheelchairs crowd-surfing and moshing (“Wheelchair Bound Philadelphia Man Crowd Surfs at Coheed and Cambria Concert”, Hartmann 2017; Sharp 2018), however, it is not clear how widespread events like these occur, or how many metal fans have dis/abilities. Although it is difficult to ascertain demographics in a global music culture, trends can be drawn from studies that have attempted other samplings (Guibert and Guibert 2016), but there has yet to be a definitive source that outlines the prominence of dis/ability in metal culture. There are a number of reasons to suspect that people with dis/abilities are prominent among heavy metal culture. For one, heavy metal largely stemmed from blues, and blues was a musical style that prominently included musicians with dis/abilities (Lower 2020), and similarly, both blues and heavy metal have similar lyrical themes about struggle and protest depicted through countercultural music. In general, music can play a therapeutic role as it can improve the coping abilities of people with dis/abilities, and in particular, it can help with improving social abilities (Brown and Jellison 2012). Despite the lack

of data on dis/ability in heavy metal, the music style generally appeals to a wide range of people of various ethnic, age, gender, education, geographic, and economic backgrounds (Mizell 2005). Heavy metal disproportionately attracts individuals with low self-esteem due to its empowering nature (Arnett 1991), which is a trait common among those with dis/abilities particularly when stigma is present (Paterson et al. 2012). The ‘outsider’ identity of metal fans also has potential overlap with those who feel like societal outsiders as a result of their dis/ability. In addition, if metal culture is perceived as having fewer stigmas towards dis/ability than broader society, then that would also increase the likelihood that it is a group with a sizeable number of dis/abled group members.

Stigma

It is often the case that people with dis/abilities are stigmatized, meaning that they are treated as inferior by others, or that others will have assigned preconceived negative attributions about them based on their dis/ability. Some of the most common ways in which people display stigma is through social rejection, social isolation, or lowered expectations for individuals with dis/abilities, which is commonly communicated through speech, eye contact, and interpersonal distance. The resulting social isolation/exclusion can cause stigmatized individuals to feel limited in who they can form strong social bonds with, sometimes limiting them to other individuals that share their dis/ability (Coleman 2013; Hall 2010). People with dis/abilities are among those that see the highest rates of discrimination, and this has detrimental effects on their health and well-being (Branco, Ramos, and Hewstone 2019). Stigma can cause affected individuals to self-fulfill negative traits about themselves, which introduces additional hurdles in their own lives. It is important for individuals with dis/abilities to feel like they belong somewhere, and feel that they are represented by others that show that they can be strong, successful, and productive members of society that are not inferior due to their dis/ability. It is difficult to overcome the inhibiting effects of social stigma, so any social groups or cultures where individuals feel less stigmatized, and simultaneously feel a greater sense of acceptance, will be more attractive to them.

The historical contextualization of dis/ability

Similar to how metal culture and lyrics embrace mental illness through exaggeration to the point of inaccuracy for creative purposes (Messick, Aranda, and Day 2020), the same is true of dis/ability. Rock, punk, and heavy metal, even in the early days of those respective genres, were appropriating exploitative images and lyrics that equated dis/ability with ‘freak show spectacle,’ which included depicting self-destructive rock stars as similar ‘freaks.’ This extended to the inclusion of people with dis/abilities into live concert performances (Church 2006; McKay 2015). There is a lot of overlap between the metal aesthetic and horror films, so just as horror films have used dis/ability to augment horror (Hall, 2016), a similar application has been found within metal culture. Metal culture frequently embraces other themes found in horror films, including religion, death, murder, suicide, mental illness, and drug use, but just as some of these themes are used in a derogatory way in horror to fit a narrative, similar is found in their application through metal lyrics, album covers, music videos, and on-stage performances. Metal

music encompasses and embraces many themes that are societal and cultural taboos, but that doesn't mean that they're represented accurately or that their representations cannot be considered prejudiced or ableist.

Although to the outsider, the way dis/ability is displayed in the context of rock, punk, and metal cultures might be interpreted as purely exploitative, negative, and/or dehumanizing, it is important to understand how individuals with dis/abilities within those cultures experience and contextualize that incorporation. For example, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s counterculture that birthed heavy metal music, members of these outsider music cultures applied the term 'freak' as a "badge of countercultural pride" (Church 2006). This application of the term 'freak' had broad meaning that encompassed social outsiders, non-normal individuals, social deviants, and the dis/abled. Although the term has derogatory roots in its association with exploitative freakshows, in the context of rebellious music cultures, the term was taken back from mainstream culture and applied as a source of pride and unity among individuals in rock, punk, and metal. These music subcultures emphasized ideas of unity among those that were social outsiders, and that included those with dis/abilities and mental health disorders, because those individuals could largely feel like social outsiders too. It is this area of overlap between the outsider identities of metal culture and individuals with dis/abilities that makes the synchrony of those identities an intuitive and compatible one. Despite the inaccuracy in which dis/ability and mental health disorders might be depicted, the embracing of those otherwise societally taboo topics meant that regular stigmas did not apply, as dis/ability was something glorified like other taboo characteristics that metal's group members live with. Instead of dis/ability being seen as a shortcoming, in metal it could be embraced for providing a unique and differentiating quality from what is 'mainstream'. In other words, being 'different' is largely a good thing in metal, at least as far as being different within metal's own cultural norms and boundaries. This lineage of acceptance of outsiders has changed with music cultures since the 1960s, at least in terms of terminology applied, but the effect remains the same: a culture that embraces dis/ability and mental health concerns, even if inaccurate in its depictions, can still result in an environment that has fewer negative stigmas for individuals with dis/abilities and mental health concerns. The use of "freak" has largely departed from modern versions of these subcultures, but there is a still lineage that can be traced to current punk and extreme metal subcultures that continue to embrace outsider identities, which similarly welcome dis/abled individuals as a result. The inversion of societal taboos in rock and metal subcultures causes those with mental health struggles and/or dis/abilities to be in a prime position for inclusion by default, as long as they share an interest in metal music.

I have mentioned that punk and metal embrace dis/ability and mental health struggles, but now I'll provide some depth to how widespread that fascination is. The interest in using dis/ability in musical narratives extends to the monikers that many bands chose. In punk rock, there were bands with the names Epileptics, Disability Sickness, The Autistics, Cripples, and Disability. In regards to metal, insight can be drawn from Encyclopaedia Metallum, the world's largest online encyclopedia of metal bands. A search on Metallum reveals that there are at least

nine different death metal bands with the moniker 'Deformed' originating from countries as diverse as Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Mexico. One of the aforementioned bands released a demo entitled "Mentally Sick," further demonstrating that both dis/ability and mental health conditions are prominently featured in heavy metal music in its lyrical narratives and aesthetic. From there, the list is seemingly endless, with a French death metal band known as Disabled, three bands with the name Epilepsy, three bands called Autism, two bands called Asthma, two bands named Glaucoma, eleven that incorporate 'mania', 19 that include 'anxiety,' four bands called Agoraphobia, five bands called Stress, fifty bands either called Trauma or include the word in their name, seven bands with 'illness,' four that include 'anorexia,' 11 bands called Insomnia, 38 bands with the word 'depression' in their band name, 26 include 'addiction,' 51 include 'delirium,' seven bands called Schizophrenia, and sixty different bands that are either named Sickness or include the word in the name of their band, including Abnormal Sickness, Bone Sickness, Convulsion Sickness, Fatal Sickness, Mental Sickness, and Uncured Sickness. Similarly, 87 entries came up for bands with the word 'disease' included in their band names. 92 bands are either called 'Disorder' or have names like Anxiety Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, Brain Disorder, Chronic Disorder, Genetic Disorder, Intestinal Disorder, Mental Disorder, Neurotic Disorder, Panic Disorder, Psychotic Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, Emotional Disorder Factors, and Major Affective Disorder. These types of heavy metal band names are especially prevalent in more obscure forms of heavy metal, including death metal and grindcore, that heavily incorporate being social outsiders into their subculture identities, and that openly embrace taboo lyrical themes. These subgenres and crossovers between the two frequently have lyrics dealing with medical issues or surgery too, with prominent bands including the likes of Carcass, Haemorrhage, Pathologist, Pathogen, Autopsy, Cadaver, Cancer, Cerebral Rot, Cartilage, and Anatomy, and so embracing mental health struggles and dis/abilities is likely a natural extension that still falls comfortably within the restraints of heavy metal's acceptable lyrical and aesthetic subject matter. These examples only scratch the surface.

Beyond the names of bands, the lyrical themes in many heavy metal songs can focus on dis/ability too. A well-known example of dis/ability in heavy metal lyrics can be drawn from the song 'One' by Metallica. The song describes a soldier whose body is severely damaged by an explosion. The lyrics detail feeling trapped inside a new life of horror, as the protagonist is unable to feed himself and requires the use of machines just to continue living. It is one of their most popular songs despite having such heavy, powerful, and disparaging subject matter. Although the accuracy in which disorders and dis/ability are depicted in metal lyrics and album artwork varies tremendously, qualitative evidence supports that just the widespread presence of these themes in heavy metal music serves a role in destigmatizing these topics within metal culture, which allows for communal acceptance for individuals with dis/abilities and mental health conditions, even if that doesn't necessarily mean that other metal fans will understand or empathize well with their respective conditions and experiences (Messick, Aranda, and Day 2020). Put another way, just being able to discuss taboo topics like dis/ability and mental illness, even if what is represented about those topics is inaccurate, can still serve a role in causing metal

fans to assign less stigma to individuals with dis/abilities and disorders. If the topic of dis/ability is no longer taboo, then there is less reason to treat affected individuals like they're different or inferior. That is the premise, but more research needs to be conducted to evaluate and substantiate the underlining mechanisms behind this claim further.

Cultural climate that enables psychological functions

Social support is crucial for healthy psychological functioning, and in the case of people with dis/abilities within metal culture, it can serve a number of specific functions. Although this is not an exhaustive list, it is evidenced that metal music and culture can provide individuals with mood and symptom maintenance, representation, social relatedness, belonging, and it can serve as an outlet for their experiences, despite metal's history of depicting dis/ability in exploitative, inaccurate, and exaggerated ways.

Mood and symptom maintenance

A lot of heavy metal music is perceived as violent and aggressive, and is consistent with auditory threat signals (Ollivier et al. 2019), so there has been a continual association between heavy metal and immoral or violent behavior, but that connection is largely unfounded. Rather, it has been found that heavy metal, including with violent themes, consistently has positive emotional, cognitive, and social consequences for fans (Messick 2020; Olsen et al. 2020; Sharman and Dingle 2015; Leisuk 2010; McFerran et al. 2015). It has also been shown that heavy metal music is used by people with some dis/abilities and mental health disorders to help manage their mood and symptoms (Messick, Aranda, and Day 2020; Gebhardt, Kunkel, and Goergi 2016; Gebhardt and von Georgi 2007).

Representation

Representation, in this context, means how a group of people are depicted in broader culture, which can include media representations, stereotypes, and people that act as good examples of individuals of respective backgrounds. A lack of representation or misrepresentation in popular culture and the media can lead to people feeling devalued or marginalized based on their race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, political views, or dis/ability (Caswell et al. 2016).

Representation is important for all people, including those that live with dis/abilities, because positive representation fosters the development of a healthy identity, and it can contribute to meaning-making. Efforts have been made to increase the representation of people with dis/abilities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (White and Massiha 2015), but the need for representation spans other disciplines as well, including music. The need for representation is especially important for impairments that play a prominent role in identity, such as deafness or blindness, which can be as important for identity as factors like ethnicity and gender. Dis/ability can be a social burden in that it exposes affected individuals to inspection, interrogation, interpretation, and a violation of privacy. This is largely because depictions of people with dis/abilities were historically controlled predominantly by the media, which led to inaccuracies and negative representations, and only more recently have depictions been redirected by individuals that have dis/abilities themselves through the publishing of

autobiographical texts and through public figures with dis/abilities sharing their experiences (Couser 2005). Experiencing some level of representation is what caused writer Maranda Elizabeth to experience a profound sense of spirituality and empowerment when they saw shock rock artist Marilyn Manson perform from a wheelchair following an injury (Elizabeth 2018). Rather than hiding his injury, he incorporated it into his rock aesthetic, having customized his wheelchair to match the gothic aesthetic of his musical brand. His temporary dis/ability was incorporated into the show. As a dis/abled person, it was powerful for Maranda to see a display by such a prominent musician that embraced dis/ability instead of shying away from it and hiding it from public exposure. This embracing of the injury that left Manson wheelchair-bound extended to other aspects of his concert spectacle too, as members of his road crew that assisted him on stage were costumed with hospital scrubs and surgical masks. It can be difficult to distinguish when music and musicians embrace dis/ability as an ally, versus when they exploit dis/ability for creative effect. Marilyn Manson has been known to incorporate stilt-walkers, women wearing costumes that make them appear nude with burnt faces, and other elements consistent with 'freak show' spectacle, but the musician also incorporated his own injury into his stage show. When it comes to representation, it is largely about interpretation, and in the case of Maranda, a strong sense of connection and representation was felt, so their identity as a fan clearly contextualized these displays in a way that was positive and meaningful for them.

Other prominent examples of representation also exist within rock and metal cultures. One of the most well-known is Def Leppard's drummer Rick Allen, who continued performing after losing one arm and continues to inspire many every time he performs. Another example can be found in the infamous thrash metal band Possessed, who are often credited as the creators of a subgenre of extreme metal music called 'death metal.' Frontman Jeff Becerra emits his trademark guttural vocals on stage from his wheelchair, showing that even extreme metal can be a source for representation for individuals with dis/abilities.

Social relatedness

Social relatedness is an individual's level of involvement with persons and the concurrent level of comfort associated with that involvement (Hagerty et al. 1993), which is specifically used to describe positive relatedness in the context of this chapter. It is a psychological need to feel close and connected to significant others within a group. Self-determination theory has described social relatedness as one of three basic psychological needs that motivate human action, in addition to autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan 2002). Social relatedness is crucial for living a positive, happy life as it has been associated with positive effect and with greater meaning in life (Hicks and King 2009). Many dis/abilities and mental health struggles can create obstacles for achieving social relatedness due to any associated negative stigmas, symptoms that inhibit social interaction, and/or a general lack of relatability with others that aren't understanding or empathetic to the respective dis/ability. All of these can contribute to individuals with dis/abilities as feeling like social outsiders, which is why many individuals that have a dis/ability or a mental health disorder find a sense of social relatedness within heavy metal culture; they bond over a similar feeling of being social outsiders. Individuals with

dis/abilities frequently have fewer opportunities to experience facets of social relatedness, including challenging experiences, peer role modeling, learning new skills, taking meaningful roles, and engaging in informal social experiences with similar peers (D'Eloia and Sibthorp 2014). Social relatedness can be especially difficult to obtain with conditions like autism spectrum disorder, where the disorder itself is often characterized by difficulties with social interactions (Walters, Barrett, and Feinstein 1990).

Belonging

Beyond feelings of social connection, it is also important for all people to feel like there is somewhere where they *belong*. Belonging is that sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity, a feeling of being at home in a place and of being valued (Riley 2019). The identity of metal music fans is that of the outsider, so this already has overlap with the identity of individuals with physical or mental dis/abilities, so it is through this outsider status, a common bond over music, and social relatedness that can create a sense of belonging. Metal culture is generally more welcoming to any type of societal outsider, at least in idealized principle, because that is largely what builds a sense of social relatedness among metal music fans. One of the identifying cultural staples of heavy metal culture is its focus on being an interconnected and devoted global community, so much so that new metal fans can feel deeply connected to the global metal community through social networking websites before they have even met another community member in person (Rowe 2018). Metal is largely collectivistic in how it operates, so once someone becomes a member, it often becomes a deep and meaningful relationship regardless of background, so many metal fans feel a sense of belonging within metal culture.

An outlet for sharing their experiences

Heavy metal and punk also supply an outlet for musicians with dis/abilities to address their experiences and share them with others, which could similarly inspire fans with dis/abilities, and provide a source of representation for people with dis/abilities. Further, sharing their experiences helps people understand what living with a dis/ability is like. Sharing experiences with dis/ability can help shift attitudes away from negative attitudes and stigmatization. When metal bands perform, it is usually on a stage towering above an audience, which puts them in a position of power and influence to communicate with metal fans. Just like other metal musicians, metal musicians with dis/abilities can also utilize this cultural construct. In 2014, British newspaper The Guardian highlighted bands made up of people with dis/abilities and how they used music to communicate their experiences (Strudwick 2014). They had powerful lyrics about their lives with Autism, Down's Syndrome, learning dis/abilities, and they emphasized in their songs how individuals with dis/abilities are mistreated in residential care homes. For example, the band Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät, which is a band composed of four individuals with learning dis/abilities, has a song that includes the lyrics, "I don't want to live [in a] group home. I don't want institution. I want respect." Some bands use dis/ability as a focal point for their collective identity, as is the case with the metal band Zombie Crash, who are described by charity

organization Carousel as “the world’s premier learning dis/abled metal band” (<http://www.carousel.org.uk/our-artists-zombie-crash/>). This outlet can help individuals cope with dis/ability too, as the frontman of Zombie Crash told The Guardian in the aforementioned piece, that when he’s performing on stage he feels like his learning dis/ability goes away.

Context to theory: Firsthand accounts

To get a better understanding of the experience of dis/ability in metal culture, I conducted a couple of interviews with individuals that knew the experience firsthand. I interviewed Nicolas Mallin Rocha, a metal musician who is completely blind, and Richard McDeid, who has received widespread media exposure through outlets like Yahoo News and The Independent due to his lifelong mission to help his son with cerebral palsy -Mason McDeid - who even from a young age was helped through metal music and culture.

The case of Nicolas Mallin Rocha

Nicolas Mallin Rocha is a metal musician with diabetic retinopathy, which is a complication that can arise from diabetes that can cause blindness. Nicolas has been completely blind for the past four years, but despite his loss of vision, he continues to play in several Los Angeles-based heavy metal bands, including bass and vocals for sludge metal band Din and crossover punk-thrash band Septik Onslaught, as well as playing guitar in doom metal band Pendulous. Nicolas began his interest in heavy metal music at age five, as his father would routinely play Black Sabbath and Ozzy Osbourne albums. His connection to metal music began with the music and aesthetic, but later he felt a strong connection to the ‘social outsider’ aspect of heavy metal culture too. This wasn’t because of Nicolas’ blindness as it predated that. It was because he was an immigrant that moved to the United States from Mexico. As Nicolas explained:

Since I had moved to the United States from Mexico, I think feeling like a social outsider was going to happen anyway. As I grew up and discovered more people listened to the same type of music as me, I realized that they also felt like outsiders for some reason or another and, because of this, we were able to befriend each other, support one another and find others that felt much like we did. I always felt like the friendships that grew as a result of that were some of the better, more profound friendships I’ve been able to keep.

Nicolas experienced social relatedness and a feeling of belonging with other metal fans. Before exploring to what extent Nicolas felt that heavy metal culture was an inclusionary environment, I first wanted to understand how individuals treated him based on his blindness. Nicolas explained:

I don’t know if I can say that I’ve been discriminated against. I have however been treated *differently*. People move out of the way whenever I’m walking down the street or in a store. People generally are a bit more nice when they see my white cane and I get offered help a lot more than I used to [before I was blind].

And people are a lot more complementary to me when they find out that I play music or I am part of a band. This is a bit of a double-edged sword because I have found instances of people saying “hey, that band with the blind guy is pretty good” whereas before people would just generally complement the band or be ambivalent. I have to admit, there have been times where these come off as condescending and patronizing when I know that is not the original intent. Of course, I have also experienced a few instances where people make snide remarks to one another as I passed them by. These are very few and far in between but it happens, I just usually try to laugh it off or make a loud joke about it so that people know that I’m blind, not deaf.

Like many individuals, Nicolas does not want to be *defined* by his dis/ability, and similarly, he doesn’t want his music to be judged respective of his dis/ability, rather than his musical ability. He further explained some misconceptions that people have about people that are blind:

I’d say some of the general misconceptions people have about being blind is that we can’t do every day things like take care of our living environments, be active on social media, have normal hobbies, be impactful entities in the work environment, be tutors or teachers, or even play music. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been told that I don’t *look* blind, the misconception there being that blind people have a particular look.

He mentioned a number of ways in which people often assume that an individual with blindness cannot be productive members of society in many ways that others can, which simply isn’t true. I asked Nicolas if members of the heavy metal community were as guilty in treating him differently based on his blindness:

I feel like there is a difference for sure. The heavy-metal community has always been supportive of me, from whether it was before I went blind or now. I’ve had very supportive band members, friends in other bands, promoters who were always friendly and helpful to me continue to be just as friendly and supportive. With the general public, as I mentioned before, they do treat me nicer but this wasn’t necessarily how I was treated before [I was blind]. I think because the heavy-metal community welcomes outsiders, regardless of why they feel like they are outsiders, with open arms. This has lent itself to be so helpful in so many ways... I’ve always felt that in many ways, the heavy-metal scene has wanted the community aspect of itself to really shine through. Because of this, I feel like they’ve been incredibly accepting of so many individuals who have their own stories and backgrounds, as diverse as they might be and find something to really latch onto and develop strong bonds with. As a metal fan, I’ve met so many individuals that I’ve been able to befriend simply based on the fact that we really

enjoy the band we are listening to at that moment in time. I've been able to keep in touch with many of them and its led to great personal growth.

Nicolas touched on one of the main points I've made in this chapter, which is that it is the general welcoming of outsiders that creates a welcoming environment for individuals with dis/abilities. He also explained that often metal music fans don't always judge his musical ability in respect to his blindness, and that other individuals with dis/abilities have seen him as a sort of role model, stating:

Heavy metal fans have been really complementary towards not just me but the rest of my bandmates as well. This way, I don't necessarily feel singled out with the compliments and I enjoy that everybody is acknowledged for their hard work. There have also been moments where other people with different types of dis/abilities have mentioned to me that I've been inspirational with how I act with regards to my blindness and the roles I take on as a member of an active band. It's definitely great to know that some sort of positive influence can be taken from any of this.

Representation is important for individuals of all backgrounds, but in the particular case of people with dis/abilities, it is important to find representation that shows the strengths and successes of individuals with dis/abilities, and for some music fans, Nicolas was an inspiring example that you can accomplish much despite having a dis/ability.

The case of Mason McDeid

Mason McDeid, or Mason "Metal" McDeid as his father Richard affectionately recommended I write, lives with cerebral palsy as a result of Periventricular leukomalacia (PVL), a brain injury that affects some premature infants. Cerebral palsy is a group of disorders that affect the nervous system, resulting in restricted movement, learning, hearing, seeing, and/or thinking. In the case of Mason, his form of cerebral palsy is the most severe form of its subtype spastic, which is spastic quadriplegia, because Mason has never had the ability to control his legs, arms, or body. Mason has no control over his own muscles, which includes acts like swallowing, bowel movements, and both gross and fine motor skills. Mason has also never been able to speak, and spends his time in an electronic chair that Richard warmly refers to as Mason's 'throne'. The defining 'spastic' characteristic of this form of cerebral palsy has pulled Mason's bones and hips out of place, which has resulted in 133 surgeries, most of which were preventative. To help reduce the spasticity, every three months Mason receives 32 Botox shots. He has titanium bars in his spine to make sure that he can continue breathing. Mason's needs have resulted in an especially intimate bond between him and his father, as tasks as simple as drinking liquids have to be given to Mason through a syringe so that Richard can control the speed of the flow so that Mason doesn't choke. This is also related to one of the few ways in which Mason communicates, as he will stick out his tongue if he is still thirsty or hungry. Even from a young age, the struggles that Richard experienced in caring for Mason were overwhelming, as little seemed to calm

Mason from intense, continual crying fits. Richard described Mason as sometimes getting locked into a crying, unhappy state, meaning that he would cry without ceasing for entire consecutive days. Mason's crying was caused largely by discomfort and pain due to his cerebral palsy. Medical professionals told Richard that the only way to get Mason out of this crying state was to tightly wrap Mason in a blanket and hold him until he calmed. This approach was not a solution that worked well for the McDeid family, but one day, Richard had an accidental breakthrough.

Richard was playing music from the heavy metal band Metallica, and found that in response to the music, not only had Mason stopped crying, but he had also fallen asleep. Richard noticed this pattern continue, as he would play Metallica concerts on the television, and it would similarly calm Mason. This inspired Richard, as he had found a new way to communicate with and bond with his son, as he was able to identify something that connected with Mason despite his condition. Richard himself was also an avid metal music fan, as in his youth he described to me how he would sell newspapers just so that he could buy new metal albums. He said that he would always use metal as a form of escapism from hardship in his own life. Similarly, Richard's daughter was also a metal fan, and has kept Richard up-to-date on newer metal bands. Metal music became a defining characteristic between how Richard and Mason connected, and Richard fully dedicated himself to using the music that Mason enjoyed to enrich his life as much as possible. Since that fateful day where Metallica first calmed Mason, Richard has taken his son to see over 1,400 bands in concert, including at some cerebral palsy benefits that Richard hosted himself to foster public awareness about cerebral palsy and help fund research. Richard found that beyond the music, there were also unique characteristics of live metal concerts that connected with Mason, starting with how welcoming that metal concert crowds were towards Mason. Richard stated that he had:

...seen just how accepting, loving, and caring our metal family is with so many family coming up and talking to Mason, nothing but positively supporting us boys, opening and holding doors open, making holes in very crowded stadium hallways, making holes to the front on main floor and always watching our backs... our metal family has always come up to and talk with Mason and they treat him like royalty.

Despite Richard and Mason being actual, genetic family members, Richard also used the term 'family' to describe fellow concert goers. Richard is a father whose son is completely dependent on him, and even within these circumstances, he refers to other listeners of the same music style as family members because of how welcoming and caring they are to Mason when they attend metal concerts together. It can be hard to navigate venues with Mason's chair, yet complete strangers would go out of their way to clear a path, hold doors, and help protect Mason from injury in the context of raucous concert activities like moshing and crowd-surfing. Richard also described how metal music was key in coping with hospital visits, particularly when the doctor had bad news about Mason's condition:

Another thing that metal really helps with is going to doctor appointments while listening in the van driving for hours and having great metal memories to talk about always helps. Sometimes doctors tell us boys the most horrible news, [metal] really does help keep things positive. When us boys are held up in a hospital recovering from 133 surgeries or even another near-death experience, talking about metal helps pass the time whether its hours, days, weeks, or even months.

When Mason was in school, Richard described metal as being an important communication tool for teachers, as Mason would typically wear a shirt from the previous weekend's concert, which acted as a prime for teachers to communicate with Mason about his recent metal outings. Richard tried for decades to find a communication device that would work for Mason, to help him communicate, but due to his spasticity, which affected his entire body, including his fingers, hands, legs, upper and lower body muscles, there was never a device that allowed Mason to communicate effectively. As Richard took a moment to reflect on the charity benefits he had hosted for Mason, and on the many concerts that he had attended with his son, and on the worldwide news coverage of their journey, Richard told me that despite the lack of a formal communication device, that "Mason has found a way to communicate with over 300 million people in every country on our planet without saying one word." He also said that ever since his story had been shared through metal media outlets, that metal fans have sent their well-wishes to Mason "everyday... with their brotherly love, positive support; honoring and respecting Mason from all over."

I was curious how much of this metal musical preference was Richard projecting his own taste, but Richard clarified to me that there is some divergence between what types of music he and Mason enjoy. Richard explained to me that Mason is more partial to patterns and grooves in metal music, and he believed that it was those predictable patterns that brought a calming effect for his son. Mason also showed a similar preference for piano and acoustic guitar music, which have a similar calming effect on him. Mason's interest in music even extends to the words that describe it, as when Richard would even mention the word 'music,' it would cause Mason to smile. Richard explained that the novelty of metal music doesn't stop at the music, but rather, it extends to the intensity of live metal concerts. He said that Mason enjoyed all of the metal fans that would come up and greet him, and that it was an experience that Mason could not find elsewhere, so that is why metal music had a uniquely powerful influence on their lives. It provided Mason with social connections, social relatedness, and mood maintenance. Richard elaborated on the role of concerts in positively affecting Mason's life, clarifying that it wasn't about *quantity*:

Taking Mason to so many concerts was never really why us boys went to so many shows and still isn't. Getting out of the house seeing live bands and music as well as meeting new friends was important. Concerts have always been our family escape which is very important to recharge after dealing with extreme medical

craziness. Most of all, giving Mason the best life experiences and memories is what was always most important.

Mason, a young adult now in his twenties, doesn't have the ability to go and hang out with other people his age, but in the metal concert experience, Richard and Mason found an environment where Mason could meet new people, and they would always be cordial and appreciative of Mason's journey and his shared interest in metal music. Richard also summarized that metal wasn't just a music that helped him and his son communicate, nor that concerts were only a source of friendship, memories, and catharsis, but also, that it was something that defined their lives. In Richard's words, "Metal is so much more than just loud ass fuck music; it's our way of life." Metal is where Richard and Mason *belong*. This is a mentality shared by many metal fans, but in the context of Richard and Mason, it seems to be more literal than for most, since metal also served as an important communication tool when no other existed.

Discussion

Heavy metal music and culture can provide a number of important psychological functions for community members with dis/abilities, including mood and symptom maintenance, representation, social relatedness, a sense of belonging, and it provides an outlet for sharing their experiences. It has currently and historically been the case that heavy metal uses dis/ability in lyrics, imagery, and in live performances in an exaggerated and arguably exploitative way, but just the presence of those themes being embraced instead of being shied away from or treated as taboo has resulted in a perceived lower level of stigmatization towards dis/ability within metal culture. This general lack of judgment combined with overlapping identities towards being an outsider of mainstream culture is likely what creates an environment for many people with dis/abilities to feel welcomed in metal culture, or at least more welcome with fewer prejudices than they might have found elsewhere. What is presented here is largely theory applied to early trends in research about dis/ability and metal, and although the couple of interviews included here reinforce that further, it is important to note that this is just preliminary groundwork for what will hopefully be a greater investigation into metal and dis/ability. Quantitative data is needed to further understand the generalizability of the conclusions of this chapter, but it is hoped that what is provided here can act as a starting point to further understand the psychological factors at play for metal fans that live with dis/ability.

Autobiographical Note

Kyle J. Messick is a social psychologist that specializes in metal music studies and religious studies. He is an advocate for open science practices and has had works published in multiple books, including by publishers Routledge and Brill. He is a leader in studying metal music and culture from a psychological perspective, including psychological functions fulfilled, how imagery and lyrics are processed, the impact of COVID-19 on musicians, the contextualization of mental health struggles, and the influence of sacred aspects of the culture.

References

- Arnett, Jeffrey. "Heavy Metal Music and Reckless Behavior Among Adolescents." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 20, no. 6 (1991): 573-592.
- Branco, Carla, Miguel R. Ramos, and Miles Hewstone. "The Association of Group-Based Discrimination with Health and Well-Being: A Comparison of Ableism with Other "Isms"." *Journal of Social Issues* 75, no. 3 (2019): 814-846.
- Brown, Laura S., and Judith A. Jellison. "Music Research with Children and Youth with Dis/Abilities and Typically Developing Peers: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Music Therapy* 49, no. 3 (2012): 335-364.
- Caswell, Michelle, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor. "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': Community Archives and the Importance of Representation." *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5-26.
- Church, David. "'Welcome to the Atrocity Exhibition': Ian Curtis, Rock Death, and Dis/ability." *Dis/ability Studies Quarterly* 26, no 4 (2006). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/804/979>.
- Coleman Brown, Lerita. "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified." In L.J. Davis (2nd Eds.), *The Dis/abilities Studies Reader*, Routledge, 2013: 141-152.
- Cooper, Leonie. "Swedish Man Gets Disability Benefits After His Heavy Metal Obsession is Declared an 'Addiction'." Last modified February 24, 2015. <https://www.nme.com/news/music/various-artists-1075-1221250>.
- Couser, G. Thomas. "Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation." In L.J. Davis (2nd Eds.), *The Dis/abilities Studies Reader*, Routledge. 2005: 399-404.
- Dawes, Laina. *What Are You Doing Here?: A Black Woman's Life and Liberation in Heavy Metal*. Bazillion Points, 2012.
- Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. "Overview of Self-Determination Theory: An Organismic Dialectical Perspective." *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. Rochester NY Press: 2002, 3-33.
- D'Eloia, Melissa H., and Jim Sibthorp. "Relatedness for Youth with Disabilities: Testing a Recreation Program Model." *Journal of Leisure Research* 46, no. 4 (2014): 462-482.
- Elizabeth, Maranda. "Dis/ability, Freaking Out, and Marilyn Manson." Last modified March 12, 2018. <https://marandaelizabeth.com/2018/03/12/dis/ability-freaking-out-marilyn-manson/>
- Everley, Dave. Does Metal Have a Problem with Race? *Metal Hammer*. March 27, 2016. <https://www.loudersound.com/features/does-metal-have-a-problem-with-race>

- Gebhardt, Stefan, Markus Kunkel, and Richard von Georgi. "The Role Musical Preferences Play in the Modulation of Emotions for People with Mental Disorders." *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 47 (2016): 66-71.
- Gebhardt, Stefan, and Richard von Georgi. "Music, Mental Disorder and Emotional Reception Behavior." *Music Therapy Today* 8, no. 3 (2007): 419-445.
- Goodley, Dan. "The Dis/Ability Complex." *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 5-22.
- Guibert, Christophe, and Grme Guibert. "The Social Characteristics of the Contemporary Metalhead: The Hellfest Survey." *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies* (2016): 167-189. Routledge.
- Hagerty, Bonnie MK, Judith Lynch-Sauer, Kathleen L. Patusky, and Maria Bouwsema. "An Emerging Theory of Human Relatedness." *Image: The Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 25, no. 4 (1993): 291-296.
- Hall, Melinda. "Horrible Heroes: Liberating Alternative Visions of Disability in Horror." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2016).
- Hall, Sarah A. "The Social Inclusion of Young Adults with Intellectual Dis/Abilities: A Phenomenology of Their Experiences." Phd diss., University of Nebraska 2010.
- Hartmann, Graham. "10 Awesome Wheelchair Crowd Surfers." Last updated November 6, 2017. <https://loudwire.com/10-awesome-wheelchair-crowd-surfers/>
- Hecker, Pierre. "Heavy Metal in a Muslim Context." *The rise of the Turkish metal underground* (2005): 8-9.
- Heesch, Florian, and Niall Scott, eds. *Heavy metal, gender and sexuality: interdisciplinary approaches*. Routledge, 2016.
- Hicks, Joshua A., and Laura A. King. "Positive Mood and Social Relatedness as Information about Meaning in Life." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 6 (2009): 471-482.
- Kartheus, Wiebke. "The 'Other' as Projection Screen: Authenticating Heroic Masculinity in War-Themed Heavy Metal Music Videos." *Metal Music Studies* 1, no. 3 (2015): 319-340.
- Lesiuk, Teresa. "The Effect of Preferred Music on Mood and Performance in a High-Cognitive Demand Occupation." *Journal of Music Therapy* 47, no. 2 (2010): 137-154.
- Lower, Jonathan S. "The Blindness Blues: Race and Dis/ability in the American Country Blues." PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2020.

- Lynxwiler, John and David Gay. "Moral Boundaries and Deviant Music: Public Attitudes Toward Heavy Metal and Rap." *Deviant Behavior* 21, no. 1 (2000): 63-85.
- McFerran, Katrina Skewes, Sandra Garrido, Lucy O'Grady, Denise Grocke, and Susan M. Sawyer. "Examining the Relationship Between Self-Reported Mood Management and Music Preferences of Australian Teenagers." *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 24, no. 3 (2015): 187-203.
- McKay, George. "Punk Rock and Disability." *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies* Edited by Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner, and Joseph Straus (2015): Oxford, 226-244.
- Messick, Kyle J. A Psychological Study of the Sacred in Metal Music Culture, PhD diss., Coventry University 2020.
- Messick, Kyle J., and Blanca E. Aranda. "The Role of Moral Reasoning and Personality in Explaining Lyrical Preferences." *Plos one* 15, no. 1 (2020): e0228057.
- Messick, Kyle J., Blanca Aranda, and Chris Day. "The Experiences of Metal Fans with Mental and Developmental Disorders in the Metal Music Community." *Metal Music Studies* 6, no. 2 (2020): 193-214.
- Mizell, Lee. "Music Preferences in the US: 1982-2002." *National Endowment for the Arts* (2005).
- Moberg, Marcus. "Religion in Popular Music or Popular Music as Religion? A Critical Review of Scholarly Writing on the Place of Religion in Metal Music and Culture." *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 1 (2012): 113-130.
- Ollivier, Rosalie, Louise Goupil, Marco Liuni, and Jean-Julien Aucouturier. "Enjoy The Violence: Is Appreciation for Extreme Music the Result of Cognitive Control over the Threat Response System?" *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 37, no. 2 (2019): 95-110.
- Olsen, Kirk N., Merrick Powell, Aydin Anic, Robert J. Vallerand, and William Forde Thompson. "Fans of Violent Music: The Role of Passion in Positive and Negative Emotional Experience." *Musicae Scientiae* (2020): 1029864920951611.
- Paterson, Lucy, Karen McKenzie, and Bill Lindsay. "Stigma, Social Comparison and Self-Esteem in Adults with an Intellectual Disability." *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 25, no. 2 (2012): 166-176.
- Riley, Kathryn. "Agency and Belonging: What Transformative Actions Can Schools take to Help Create a Sense of Place and Belonging?." *Educational and Child Psychology* 36, no. 4 (2019): 91.

- Rowe, Paula. "‘That Sense of Metal Community is Great’: Narrative Constructions of Acceptance and Belonging." In *Heavy Metal Youth Identities: Researching the Musical Empowerment of Youth Transitions and Psychosocial Wellbeing*. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018. 71-96.
- Sharman, Leah, and Genevieve A. Dingle. "Extreme Metal Music and Anger Processing." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 9 (2015): 272.
- Sharp, Tyler. "Elderly Woman in Wheelchair Enters First Mosh Pit, Has Time of Her Life." Last updated September 13, 2018. <https://loudwire.com/woman-wheelchair-mosh-pit-slayer-video/>
- Sinclair, Gary. "Heavy Metal Rituals and the Civilising Process." *Can I Play With Madness? Metal, Dissonance, Madness and Alienation* (2011): 93-100.
- Snell, Dave, and Darrin Hodgetts. "Heavy Metal, Identity and the Social Negotiation of a Community of Practice." *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 17, no. 6 (2007): 430-445.
- Soltani, Amanallah, Samsilah Roslan, Maria Chong Abdullah, and Chan Cheong Jan. "Music as the Means to Stimulate Novelty and Challenge Seeking in Persons with Intellectual Disability." *Disability, CBR and Inclusive Development* 23, no. 4 (2012): 41-53.
- Strudwick, P. (April 1 2014). On Stage Talent Counts, not Dis/Ability. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/apr/01/constant-flux-learning-dis/abled-bands-mainstream>
- Walters, Anne S., Rowland P. Barrett, and Carl Feinstein. "Social Relatedness and Autism: Current Research, Issues, Directions." *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 11, no. 3 (1990): 303-326.
- "Wheelchair Bound Philadelphia Man Crowd Surfs at Coheed and Cambria Concert." *Fox 29 Philadelphia*. July 20, 2018. <https://www.fox29.com/news/wheelchair-bound-philadelphia-man-crowd-surfs-at-coheed-and-cambria-concert>
- White, Jeffrey L., and G. H. Massiha. "Strategies to Increase Representation of Students with Disabilities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)." *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education* 4, no. 3 (2015): 89-93.
- Wray, Daniel Dylan. "Where Heavy Metal is Headed." *Noisey: Music By Vice*. August 29, 2018. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9kmjvy/where-heavy-metal-is-headed>