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## A Man Behind Everything? Motivational Sources of Metal Listening Among Female Audiences

### Introduction

This article is a reworked version of Gabriela Stašová's paper *Za vším hledej muže? Motivační zdroje poslechu metalu u ženského publika (A man behind everything? Motivational sources of metal listening among female audiences)* presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Czech Conference about Metal (Brno, 2021) on the theme scenes, gender, identities. Due to its topic, the conference (with Stašová's contribution in particular) received a broad response from the public and aroused controversy within a sector of Czech metal subculture.<sup>1</sup> The controversy centered on the perception that the study of gender problematics (gender studies) and metal studies – as well as the social sciences and humanities in general – are useless pursuits (see Miroslav Vrzal's article in this issue).

Metal studies has become more significant among Czech academics only in recent years, following the establishment of the Czech Metal Studies (CMS) association in 2017. Since its beginnings, CMS has organized Czech academic conferences under the Department for the Study of Religion at Masaryk University in Brno (where CMS originated). From the primary focus on metal and religion, CMS has recently opened to other areas of interest (especially gender studies in metal over the past two years)

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<sup>1</sup> Although many authors reject the term subculture and instead use the term scene (see Kahn-Harris 2007), for the purpose of this paper, we will keep using the term "subculture". In contrast to the scene (more fluid and often tied to specific metal subgenres; see Kahn-Harris 2007), we understand subculture as emphasizing a particular collective identity with common elements of metal on the one hand, and the differences and boundaries between various subcultures and towards what is perceived by them as mainstream on the other (Vrzal, Řezníček 2017; see also Kolářová 2011: 14–18). Importantly, notwithstanding the prefix "sub-", subculture does *not* imply here something culturally inferior or deviant.

and pushed for greater multidisciplinary, this following the international boom in metal studies and the lack of interest in metal problematics in Czech subcultural studies, social sciences, and humanities in general. The thematic interest in gender and metal at the last CMS conference represents the current multidisciplinary direction that CMS is aiming for (see article “Czech Metal Studies: 5 Years of the Study of Metal [and Religion]” in this issue).

In the study of musical subcultures, metal was long treated as a marginal topic. However, in recent years, has come to be regarded (at least partially) as a legitimate part of global culture that is respected within various subcultures (Holland, Spracklen 2018). In the last decade, metal studies grew into a broad multidisciplinary field that includes history, sociology, and cultural and subcultural studies together with political science, musicology, and gender studies (Brown, Spracklen, Kahn-Harris, Scott 2016). Metal and gender now stand as one of the most important topics in the field, alongside other critical issues, including metal and globalization, modernity, politics, and metal infrastructures and industries (Wallach, Berger, Greene 2011). The importance of the topic “metal and gender” is highlighted, for example, by the comprehensive book *Heavy Metal, Gender and Sexuality: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Heesch, Scott 2016).

There has been interest in metal and gender from the early days of metal studies, a field that began to coalesce in the 1990s. Deena Weinstein discussed metal as a realm of masculinity as early as 1991. Yet the implications of gender in metal were addressed more fully in Robert Walser’s prescient book *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993). Here Walser describes metal – specifically heavy metal, for he is not interested in its extreme subgenres – as a distinctly masculine environment and an arena of male power (Walser 1993). Many authors still follow a masculine-centered perspective on metal subculture, some even describing metal as *hypermasculine* (see Rogers, Deflem 2022). Subsequently, several studies demonstrate how masculinity manifests in specific aspects of metal: e.g., Karl Spracklen (2020) examines how the pagan past, race, and identity in national-warrior myths appearing in metal are constructed via the concept of masculinity.

As with other music subcultures – for example, punk, skinheads, hip-hop, and techno (see Kolářová 2011; Kolářová, Oravcová 2018) – fewer women participate in metal subculture compared to men. In the United States, the metal audience is 65–70% male (Purcell 2003: 100), in the UK 70–75% (Gruzelier 2007: 62), and in Germany 85% (Chaker 2013).<sup>2</sup> This disproportion is evident also in the number of female metal musicians. According to data from Pauwke Berkers and Julian Schaap, in only ten countries women account for more than 10% of all metal musicians, and women are responsible only for 3% of all global metal music production (Berkers, Schaap 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Chaker also surveyed German black and death metal scenes. According to the results in 2007, the proportion of male black metal fans was 83.4%. Only 16.6% of the participants were female. Regarding death metal fans, there were 86.2% males and only 13.8% females. “Thus, both the German black and death metal scenes are clearly male-dominated.” (Chaker 2016: 150).

While the percentage of women is quite low, they indeed are present and participate as active members of the global metal subculture (and in metal studies, see Hickam, Wallach 2011).<sup>3</sup> Despite some previous characterizations of women in metal (e.g., in Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies; Smolík 2017: 87; see also Kolářová 2011: 31), women are certainly not just passive accompaniments to men nor simply sex symbols consuming the subcultural fashions. According to Rosemary Hill, the wider problem of subcultural theory, more generally, is that it does not provide adequate space for female actors. Part of the problem is that women often engage in musical subcultures in different ways that have been marginalized in the metal studies literature that itself is largely produced by male academics (Hill 2014). Moreover, while metal remains male-dominated, the number of women in the metal subculture continues to increase longitudinally (Rogers, Deflem 2022: 11; Purcell 2003). As Deena Weinstein describes, women have begun to participate in all metal genres and the number of female fans has risen exponentially in the second decade of the twenty-first century (Weinstein 2016: 22). It is therefore probable that women in metal will play an increasingly important role.

Although most authors studying gender in metal focus on masculinity, there are also some who center on femininity and the roles of women (see for example selected chapters in Heesch, Scott 2016). Some studies on gender and metal (also conducted from a feminist perspective) focus directly on gender inequality (see Berkers, Schaap 2018) and sexism in metal. There are also qualitative interviews with female metal participants (similar to our study). For example, Sonia Vasan (2011) studied the death metal scene and argued that interviews with female death metal fans reveal sexist practices and a willingness to tolerate them. Chaker, based on her qualitative observation and interview material gathered in the German black and death metal scenes between 2005 and 2008 writes:

Black and death metal are mostly produced by men and quite clearly address other men. Correspondingly, the rules in the music and the scene are made by men; women initially have to accept these if the recognisability of the symbolic system of heavy metal is not to be endangered or thrown into disorder. Men as gatekeepers watch over the adherence to these rules. Thus, women – unlike men – often can only prove their scene credibility by showing their knowledge of the scene or proving that they possess skills and power positions that are relevant to the scene (Chaker 2016: 159).

Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) similarly suggests that the personal experience of extreme metal and its norms is different for women compared to men: “Women who wish to become involved in the scene are more limited than men in how they are able to define themselves” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 74). Hill elaborates that Kahn-Harris’s explanations regarding the marginalization of women in extreme metal is caused by

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Miroslav Vrzal, during his participant observation in one of the Czech metal pubs (Paterlord pub situated in Brno, the second biggest city in the Czech Republic), made several sums of men and women, with the proportion of women sometimes reaching up to 40% (see Vrzal 2018: 89). Moreover, the pub itself was owned by a metal fan woman who ran the place together with her husband. The metal pub Paterlord was in 2006–2014 one of the main metal subculture’s infrastructural centers in Brno.

“few role models, exclusion by male fans, pornographic images, lyrics of sexual violence and sexism from other scene members” that “creates a sense of the extreme metal scene as hostile to women, which goes some way to explaining why women are not involved in the scene in greater numbers” (Hill 2014: 178). Hill evokes the notion of an ‘imaginary community’ which supposedly “enables the consideration of how women fans imagine themselves as part of a community without eliding the difficulties imposed by structural sexism and brings the focus back to the pleasure in the music” (Hill 2014: 174). However, from our perspective, understanding metal as an essentially “hostile environment for women” is a stereotype that requires further study. The validity of such a perspective is further problematized by the increasing number of women in metal, including extreme metal subgenres.

Our study<sup>4</sup> is based on the field research of Gabriela Stašová, carried out from May 2021 to the present, that deals with women metal fans in Czechia. Within the framework of this research, seventeen qualitative interviews with female metalheads were conducted, of which two participants were active metal musicians.

### **The Position of Women in Czech Musical Subcultures**

Although local music subcultures are part of a broader international context, they are also “glocalized” and shaped by the post-socialist environment (Kolářová 2011: 237–242; Daniel 2016). Music subcultures in Czechia and many post-communist countries feature idiosyncrasies and developmental trajectories divergent from subcultures in, for example, Western Europe. The local situation stems from the experience of the communist regime<sup>5</sup> and the “golden era” of the 1990s after the “Velvet revolution”, when various subcultures such as metal, skinhead, or punk (later also techno and hip-hop) underwent a considerable boom during the transformation from communism to democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Women in Czech musical subcultures were partially documented and described by a research team led by Marta Kolářová (2011) that conducted field research in punk, hip-hop, techno, and skinhead subcultures. The role of women in Czech punk and hip-hop, specifically, was studied by Kolářová and Anna Oravcová (2018). Based on their general subcultural research, Kolářová (2011) describes the internal distinction between “girl and boy” subcultural styles. The male style typically defines the subculture, while the female style is derived from it. However, the specifics of these stylistic forms always depend on the boundaries and permeability between male and female roles. In general, girls’ subcultural style differs from the

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<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Vrzal is the primary author of the article’s introductory section. Gabriela Stašová undertook the research, analysis, and writing of the main body of the text. Jana Nenadalová worked to bring these parts together and completed the overall form and style of the article.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Vrzal (2022; 2017: 27) showed that members of the metal subculture still refer to censorship in the communist era when they face the cancellation of black metal concerts.

<sup>6</sup> For more about the problem of Czech subcultures in the period of socialism and post-socialism, especially in connection to violence, see Ondřej Daniel (2016).

style of “mainstream” girls, and their unusual appearance transgresses the boundaries of mainstream femininity and disrupts the normative gender order. Therefore, subcultural girls are often attracted by the potential for challenging mainstream femininity.

According to the testimonies of Kolářová’s research participants (2011: 223–227; see also Kolářová, Oravcová 2018), “softer” substyles are usually labeled more feminine than the “harder” ones. Kolářová’s team (2011) and Kolářová and Oravcová (2018) also found that supposed subcultural gender equality was often verbalized in a rather illusory way (especially by men). The typical narrative suggests that nothing should stop women from participating in the subculture. However, subcultural insiders explain away the lower number of female participants by suggesting that women generally tend to be more mainstream, are devoted primarily to appearance, and sometimes violent subcultural behaviors are not appealing to them. For example, girls are described as physically weaker in aggressive dance forms such as the “pogo” and as such prefer to remain on the sidelines instead of taking part in the “moshpit”. Furthermore, even if men regard female bands as talented and impactful, women performers are still often judged mainly by their appearance. Subcultural men question women’s ability to perform at the same skill level as is expected from men alongside women’s sole ability to understand the subculture “as men do”. Men within the subculture may treat women with disrespect, perceive them as inferior, or regard them as mere sexual objects. As Kolářová and Oravcová describe, the need to actively balance femininity and masculinity then leads women to choose one of two basic roles (not only inside subcultures, but also in related social movements): a female warrior who comes close to adopting the masculine role; or, a princess, one who embraces femininity and sexuality at least in part as an affirmation of subcultural gender expectations (Kolářová 2006; Kolářová, Oravcová 2018). This primary difference in women’s subcultural roles is also evident in our research.

This article thus further works to fill a gap in subcultural research by examining women’s roles in Czech metal. In general, metal has mostly been ignored in the Czech study of musical subcultures<sup>7</sup>. In the last seven years, the publication of articles and book chapters on Czech metal significantly increased<sup>8</sup>, partially due to activities of the CMS group. Masculinity in metal (specifically Czech brutal death metal) was also examined by Hradecká (2019) in her fieldwork-based thesis, later presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Czech conference about metal. However, our study is the first on women in Czech metal one solely based on the analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with women involved in the subculture.

Stašová was partially involved in the metal subculture since she was young and personally knows a lot of metalhead women. Thanks to this, she overcame the initial distrust of her participants and managed to illicit richly open responses from interviewees. Simultaneously, she is aware of the possible risk of conflicting interests

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<sup>7</sup> With some exceptions, such as Mareš 2003; Vrzal 2009; Vaněk J. 2010; Vaněk M. 2010; Smolík 2010; 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Daniel 2016; 2018; 2019; Mokřý 2016; Vrzal 2015; 2017; 2020; 2022; Vrzal, Řezníček 2017; Lantorová 2017; Kápčár 2018; Daniel, Almer 2018; Nenadalová 2019; Puchovský 2020.

due to her position as an insider. However, she wants to clearly state that her aim was to document the thoughts, interests, and motivations of metalhead women and contribute to the current debate concerning subcultures, gender, and metal music. In 2020, she joined the CMS research group and started working on a research outline about women in metal. Stašová has long considered research on contemporary female metal audiences to be important yet underappreciated work. She studied sociology and musicology at Palacký University in Olomouc where she began applying a combination of qualitative and quantitative research already in her master thesis *Sociologie metalové hudby: Metalový posluchač v kontextu subkultury a vkusu* (*Sociology of metal music: Metal fan in the context of subculture and taste*) (2017). The thesis comprises a profile of a metal fan and his fundamental preferences. Stašová showed that metal fan is influenced by many factors within the subculture, which he/she understood as a unified whole. This includes, for example, style of dress and adherence to certain values implicit and explicit in the music itself.

### The Research Aims and Methodology

Stašová used a qualitative approach that enabled her to garner a more in-depth understanding than a quantitative approach (see Hendl 2005). Qualitative research generally allows for a certain flexibility, allowing for potential shifts in one's research direction. The study was based on qualitative interviews<sup>9</sup>, with the research design including the following areas of interest:

- Current position of women in the metal subculture
- The visual style of female metalheads and their personal expression through image
- The perceived attitudes of metalhead men toward metalhead women
- The influence of mass media and sex symbols on the perception of women in the metal subculture
- Personal motivations for listening to metal

From March to May 2021, Stašová interviewed seventeen participants (metalhead women recruited via personal and mediated contacts) using the online platform Zoom. The age of the research sample ranged from 19 to 41 years old. Before each interview, participants were given a pilot questionnaire asking about their age, education, profession, place of residence, when and how they got into metal, what attracts them most about the music, and their favorite metal subgenres. The subsequent interview was structured according to interviewees' responses to the pilot questionnaire, although there was flexibility to pursue other areas of interest. Interviews then covered the main topics listed below, e.g., the attitudes of male metalheads towards the women audience members or inspirations for listening to metal. All data from the interviews was divided into segments based on the most frequent thematic correlations using axial coding, which, according to grounded theory, reveals themes related to the research question (Kolářová, Oravcová 2018: 312; see also Strauss, Corbin 1998; Kaufmann 2010). However, the goal of this work

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<sup>9</sup> All interviews were conducted in Czech language and then translated to English.

was only to establish hypotheses about the role and status of women in the Czech metal subculture.

Research participants formed a diverse sample but shared several commonalities. Most women were studying at or had already graduated from a university (including PhD students and researchers) and tended to lean towards extreme metal subgenres such as death and black metal (equally distributed). Two participants specifically favored grindcore, and some listened to a combination of these genres. Visual style, fashion, and image were essential topics for most interviewees, including both personal (what the participants themselves preferred) and global (participants' perceptions of mainstream metal style, including the style of other female insiders) perspectives. Furthermore, participants often spontaneously mentioned the problem of female sex symbols and "metal beauty prototypes".

### **Czech Women and Metal: Interview Analysis**

Musical subcultures create communities and collective identities that are partially based on a declared separateness from society or mainstream culture (see Kolářová 2011: 17). As some responses show, this distinction can stem from a feeling of personal weirdness or being a social outsider. Identification with the metal subculture works to overcome this feeling of isolation by creating a shared subcultural identity. For example, in the interview with participant 17, metal was portrayed as a welcoming space; even though you are not accepted anywhere else, the metal subculture will welcome you with open arms. "You're weird too, come on in!". In addition to being a space of community for those who feel they do not fit into mainstream society, metal brings together highly self-aware people too.

The view of metal as a space of acceptance is connected to the question of acceptance of women: do they feel accepted in the metal subculture? As the response from participant shows, this problem is further linked to ways women are portrayed in metal related to a specific form of subcultural capital (subcultural knowledge and commodities, Thornton 1997), which, if achieved, brings acceptance or respect. From the perspective of participant 4, acceptance and respect are not reliant on being sexually objectified but are concomitant with assimilating the values expounded in the music (and the scene more generally).

P: I'm still thinking about how the woman is portrayed in metal, and I wouldn't say she's portrayed as a sex object. Again, compared to what we see in pop music videos, the explicit sexual content is not represented in metal. It's possible that the aforementioned restraint could also be due to how we are presented in metal. Going back to it a bit more generally, like I said, they respect you as well, so I would say that if we have something in common, they automatically respect you more. You're not just a woman anymore, an object, sex... But yes, you have similar views, you like the same music, you have insight, great. So, when you show you're a valid part of that community, your status goes up (Participant 4, 30 year old, university degree in psychology, product manager in IT).



The position and roles of women in the metal subculture are constructed alongside and in counterpoint to the construction of masculinity. This characteristic metal masculinity was described by one participant as follows:

P: The subculture is fantastically confident. What I've noticed is that metal really works with such a masculine confidence, such a decisiveness, it's really those archetypes of the man, like: I know what I'm doing, I know why I'm doing it, I stand by it, I'm not ashamed of it, I'm joking, it's me. And I think those insecure individuals can really draw stability there (Participant 15, 40 year old, high school teacher).

Such comments point to the idea of drawing power from male energy, which is especially significant at metal concerts (see Walser 1993). However, the participant also demonstrates the need to know who one (a woman) "really is" and to stand for it, while defining one possible reason for identifying with the style: "I think it's a wonderful opportunity for a woman to dress in that style. To identify with that for that moment. Just to be in the spotlight of these guys who are cool as men now, who can act... and just be there to be the queen of the evening. It really is an opportunity" (Participant 15, 40 year old, high school teacher).

However, women in the metal occupy ambivalent positions. There are two basic modes of femininity, like the roles of female warrior (more masculine) and princess (highlighting femininity and sexuality) described by Kolářová and Oravcová (Kolářová 2006; Kolářová, Oravcová 2018). This basic dichotomy is illustrated in the following excerpt:

P: When I was just in that teenage high school thing, I remember there were like two basic archetypes of a metalhead. One was like the dude, like the singer from Arch Enemy...  
G. S.: Angela Gossow?

P: That's right. She's the guy who gets drunk and wears pants and is just so manly. And then there was the other style, the goth, corseted, graceful girls who listened to symphonic metal.

[...]

... I'm realizing that the pattern is there – certain more ethereal women. That actually that Angela was one of the few ones that brought a male element to it, otherwise the women were more like those princesses on a cloud. Even though the cloud was black (Participant 16, 28 year old, PhD student/researcher in religious studies).

P: Sometimes I even brag that I listen to metal, I enjoy the expressions of people when I'm somewhere in a dress, white, and when I say I listen to death metal they look at me like I'm crazy. I love the way people are surprised (Participant 6, 28 year old, online marketer).

Participant 4 views mainstream society as condemning difference more than understanding it, or even acknowledging difference but with ostentatious incomprehension. Echoing this sentiment, many participants discussed outsiders' latent prejudice toward metal fans.

P: What's worse with girls than society in general is that they take more liberties with you. Or they are more taught to comment and judge you. On top of them judging you



as an object, you suddenly have weird clothes on. I can be quite eccentric, dye my hair blue, etc. And since I was 15, I've learned to walk non-stop with headphones on and play music when I go out. Because I have absolutely no interest in listening to all the bullshit around me. And there's a lot of it. Now, I don't wear a long goth coat and I don't wear black lipstick, but I still wear weird stuff, so it's still worth it to go with the headphones. Anyway, there are a lot of comments and it also depends on how much you acknowledge your surroundings, how your family interferes and stuff. The family is actually a big factor too and they might worry more about you because "they're just weird people, you're going over there, in that corset, what are they going to think etc." (Participant 4, 30 year old, university degree in psychology, product manager in IT).

As with other interviewees, for participant 8, image became an option for self-expression. Our interview touched on the division of the metal community into two parts, one that represents a positive metal image to society and another whose subcultural image is perceived more negatively. She admits that a more distinctive image can influence other people's prejudices.

G. S.: Didn't you experience prejudice from your fellow students at university, as far as metal style can still be seen in you?

P: Not at all, not at all! The university environment, or at least the Faculty of Arts, is one of the freest environments when it comes to self-expression. It was a bit worse at work because unfortunately I had bosses who even invited me to uncomfortable personal speaking when I got a new tattoo – that if I got another tattoo, just unfortunately. But then again, I had a supervisor who was cool.

G. S.: So there's still some sort of conservative setup in certain spheres?

P: Yes, definitely, and after that experience, the tattoo also became for me a symbol of some kind of defiance against that conservatism. I have more of them, not a lot, but it's visible, and now I also wear my hair so that one half is reddish and it's colored purple-blue-turquoise (Participant 8, 30 year old, PhD student in Literature Theory, teacher in Czech Literature and History for secondary schools).

## **Exclusivity and Elitism as a Refuge**

The following section details the most frequently cited motivational resources for metal listening among the interviewees. Questions surrounding notions of exclusivity and elitism were included in the study to gauge the ways young people fit into the subculture and express their complex personalities in the formative years outside of mainstream society. This aspect emerged from analysis of the pilot questionnaire, with participants often citing the exclusivity and otherness of music as a source of metal's appeal. The interviews confirmed that many participants saw metal as a kind of 'positive outsiderism', where one is proud of being different, for example doing something different, looking different, etc. Participants mentioned this need is very strong; the metal community provided refuge for young people who refused to go along with the majority that did not match their behavior, thinking, or outward appearance.

Participant 7 admits in her interview that she sympathizes with metal not only because of the possibility of 'breaking into intelligent society', but also because of the otherness she faces and her experience caring for her sick son:

P: I have no need to be included in the stream of so-called ordinary people. It's confirmed in most research that someone who listens to metal has a higher IQ than, say, a rocker. So I rely on talking to intelligent people. I think we really hear and perceive a lot more in the music than most people who just hear that so-called vomit and incredible guitars. I think we just hear something more there (Participant 7, 41 year old, caring for a disabled son in stage 4 care dependency).

Is exclusivity an integral value of the metal community? Or is it important only for a few, like participant 7? Does this elitism have similar sociological patterns as in other subcultures, and if so, why are metal's reputation and image different from, for example, punk? Or is it perceived as elite only by interested insiders defending their territory? These questions emerged during the interview process and from the ideas of Dick Hebdige (2012) and Marta Kolářová (2011).

P: I think you're bound to find a lot of people out there who are a little bit different in some ways than other mainstream society, but on the other hand I think I'm able to find that in any other sample of people. But it's true that I have a slightly different opinion of people who are members of that subculture. That I think they think a little differently than people who turn on the radio at home and don't know anything else. We also look for completely different topics that I wouldn't look for with the mainstream population (Participant 4, 30 year old, university degree in psychology, product manager in IT).

There is a certain consensus about men and women roles concerning young metalheads within the millennial generation who experienced several booms of commercially successful music (Klusák 2018). Such opinions correlate with the interviewees' age. Perhaps the most pronounced congruence was expressed by participants 2 and 3, who mentioned differentiation and separation from their peers mainly due to listening to completely different music. Both also mentioned how their peers follow pop-music idols. One participant is humble and conciliatory towards this behavior, while the other attaches great importance to her rejection of relatively mainstream music choices.

G. S.: And when you were at that primary school, were some of the girls also in that subculture or were you more of a minority?

P: I was, but I still hang out with them to this day, even though they listen to something completely different. It's usually Harry Styles or something like that. They're completely different. It wasn't until later that I found out that there were two classmates who listened to the same music, or similar music (Participant 3, 20 year old, university student studying Czech language).

G. S.: You mention as one of the reasons for listening to metal a kind of otherness and different taste from your peers when you were growing up. Did that otherness play a big role in it? For example, did you have any feeling of separation from society or something like that?

P: I guess so, because I noticed that when I was in elementary school, for example, the girls that were there with me, they would just... One Direction, you know. A group of five guys who were just nice, and they didn't care how they sang, but they were nice, so they'd look at them... (Participant 2, 19 year old, university student).

Precisely because female metal participants often felt differently at a certain formative age, metal became a universal refuge for them. Thus, when Stašová asked if the participants felt alienated from mainstream society when they joined the so-called "counterculture" (as metal can be also understood; see Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine 2013), the answer was clear: they not only felt comfortable in metal culture, but some of them were even proud of it or felt relieved.

P: For one thing, I didn't see it as somehow joining the anti-culture, I just listen to the music I want to listen to, and it's totally everybody's business, right... And the second thing – I felt that some kind of damage to my reputation in quotes couldn't go on anymore, because I've always been not very accepted by my surroundings and, for example, by my classmates at primary school. I've always been considered a bit of a weirdo, so it didn't even cross my mind. Then, of course, I perceived it when I fit into the metal more, but then again I perceived that very positively and I always felt very comfortable in that environment because it was like I had finally found something where I fit in at least a little bit (Participant 17, 37 year old, elementary school music and language teacher, music media editor).

### **The Pose: Is "Being a Metalhead" Attractive?**

Many insiders have a negative orientation toward "poserism" in metal. A poser is one who claims to be a metalhead but has little understanding of the music or its culture (Kolářová 2011). A poser may dress in band t-shirts or otherwise style themselves in a way that references a subgenre, all while having little knowledge of the repertoire of a band they are rocking out to at a metal show. Women in particular are often seen as posers (whether they perceive themselves this way or not) when they are new to the metal subculture. A greater inclination towards either subcultural mainstream or its underground is, of course, typical for many subcultures. Interviewees often compared the metal subculture to other subcultures like skinheads or, to some degree punk, both of which are perceived as being even more "underground" than metal (Kolářová 2011).

G. S.: Now you mentioned the pose. Do you think some of these girls are in this subculture just because of a pose?

P: Yeah yeah, I'd say definitely. Actually, I was pretty much like that at first. That I knew three songs and I immediately went to that show because it was just black metal and it's cool and badass and...yeah, I was definitely like that myself (Participant 10, 21 year old, student at the Faculty of Law, working in an investment bank team).

Another issue that arose during the interview process is whether the pose is related to a particular topic of personal defiance. Participant 14, for example, admits

that the motive in her case was in part based on defiance against her family's religious foundation.

Well, I was going to church at the time and I was kind of very into it, all the fundraisers and stuff... so there was maybe a little bit of a problem and conflict there, that "devil" and just these things. Like why a person from a Catholic family. But I liked it, it appealed to me, I got excited about it, I kind of found myself in it, and plus, I was a teenager, so of course I felt the need to rebel as well (Participant 14, 27 year old, singer, disabled pensioner and peer consultant).

Should one show her metal attitude even in situations in which it can be considered problematic? Two participants, who both happen to be schoolteachers, answered yes. Their metal identities extended in this way to a broader social dimension: moral, educational, and liberal. An outsider may be challenged by questions such as: Should teachers make their personal hobbies and interests known to their students?

G. S.: Do you dress according to the metal subculture? Alternatively, how often – in plain clothes, at concerts?

P: Definitely at concert, because I want to enjoy it, but sometimes I really enjoy dressing like that for work if I'm going to a gig in the evening. I dressed like that once for a class reunion. They laughed at me. But, like, my boss really admires me for it, and the students like it too. Like, I like to dress like that sometimes in civilian life, but I'm not made up. But like yeah, when the mood is right, I like it that way because the built up wardrobe here for the metal, it's just nice (Participant 15, 40 year old, high school art teacher).

G. S.: Do you think a metal girl is willing to do whatever it takes to fit into the subculture she wants to be in? Alternatively, does age and any other factors play a role in this?

P: It seems like probably a lot, though I don't know about guys, maybe too. And as you get older, it seems to me that the willingness is greater – to do anything to fit in. For one thing, I think at that young age, you're more malleable and you try harder to fit in, whatever it is. And conversely, at a later age, one is less willing to change one's habits, I think that's a general thing.

[...]

So there are some things I wouldn't do. But on the other hand, I don't have a problem with... well, fashion, I've been looking like that since about high school, like a lot of black, and I've definitely been and am willing to do more of that, and I enjoy it and I like it – I like to dress metal for events and I like to dress metallic for civilian. I wear some metallic civvies to school when I feel like it. So there's a lot of things I'm capable of in terms of stepping out of my comfort zone. And I know they'll help me fit in better (Participant 17, 37 year old, elementary school music and language teacher, music media editor).

As Julian Schaap and Pauwke Berkers (2014) suggest, metal is also about a supposed inclination towards "negative" social phenomena, which may include Satanism, even if only as a kind of pose. Therefore, in metal, pose can also have a religious meaning, given the motifs of contemporary global brands devoted to alternative, rock, goth, and metal fashion (for example, the Killstar brand, which focuses

mainly on occult themes). However, female metalheads' interest in this subject is not necessarily shallow and superficial.

G. S.: If you had to choose one single symbol of metal, what would it be?

P: Satanism comes to mind. But it wouldn't be metal, it would be the old black. For me it would be Satanism, because not that I believe in it, but I'm pretty loaded. And I'm interested. But I'm interested in religion in general.

G. S.: Religious stuff?

P: Yeah, I've got, like, the Bible here, and I've got the Satanic Bible next to that, and I've got Norse mythology next to that. I'm into that, and I'm kind of anti-Christian too, because in my extended family in Moravia we have... I think they're Adventists. And we, when we used to go to them, I was all "Jesus Christ" etc. And then reactions like, "You're not allowed to say that." That was strange, and I had built up such a distaste for Christianity and faith from a young age that I started to get interested in things that were a little bit against it. I think an awful lot of people take Satanism as something bad, a bloody orgy and defilement by the devil... (Participant 2, 19 year old, university student).

## Visual Style and Subculture – an Expanded Dimension of Music

For the interviewees in the study, music, subculture, and visual style are given nearly equal importance. Almost all participants breached the topic of appearance and its evaluation (towards themselves and others) spontaneously. Although questions about the image of metalheads were part of the research plan, more specific discussion about appearance developed in unexpected dimensions.

The term "visual style" refers to a visual identification with the subculture and its image. In purposes of this study, it also refers to the tendency to prototype the appearance of female metalheads, idealizing their beauty in reference to media and subcultural sex symbols (for example, famous metal icons, especially female vocalists of more commercial metal bands). Visual style is important for metal subculture in relation to individuals' self-identification and self-awareness.

P: But it's just that even the way singers look – like Simone from Epica or the way Tarja looked, not so much now, of course she's getting older, although she's still a beautiful woman. It's just that those singers set the tone. That's quite interesting when I think about it – that basically the ideal of beauty for a female metalhead is what some metal singers look like (Participant 8, 30 year old, PhD student in Literature Theory, teacher in Czech Literature and History for secondary schools).

P: With Alissa White-Gluz, I feel like when she shows up somewhere, she's just kind of the prototype of what metalheads want everyone to look like (Participant 3, 20 year old, university student studying Czech language).

P: Often in the metal world they are portrayed as typical of all those models and singers in black sexy clothes, redheads and so on, but they don't all look like that, they look different. You can't generalize it (Participant 1, 24 year old, Information Technology student, librarian).

The fact that the visual aspect is inseparable from metal culture was expressed by participant 5, who wears metal style even in everyday situations.

G. S.: Did you mention the variability of the genre as one of your preferences, as well as the community around it and the visual style? Which of these wins for you?

P: It's about fifty-fifty music and visuals. Because a lot of people, just by looking at me, they can see that I live it. That it's not just some "I'm gonna paint myself for a gig, I'm gonna go crazy and be a metalhead". But I try to look like that all the time because it makes me feel good. But at the same time, I couldn't do it without the music. I couldn't look like that without liking the music and listening to it.

G. S.: So does your image and the music go hand in hand?

P: Exactly (Participant 5, 24 year old, accountant, singer/growler in a metal band).

### **Love of Music – “Girls Listen to Nightwish”**

The band Nightwish was often mentioned as one of the primary reasons for participating in metal culture. Interviewees reflected on their revelatory inclination for Nightwish, both admired and reviled among metalheads for their pompous style. Participants described how Nightwish's music combines subtlety and harshness, which drew some participants away from their former musical interests.

P: I was attracted to the music because I listened to a lot of classical music and stuff, so I was just attracted to Nightwish because they combined that hard music with that nice singing. I was most interested in that combination of the hard gritty music and the nice operatic singing that I liked before (Participant 14, 27 year old, singer, disabled pensioner and peer consultant).

P: For me it was the combination of the hard music and the opera singing. That was something new for me and it was interesting (Participant 5, 24 year old, accountant, singer/growler in a metal band).

P: Nightwish is such a girl band. I think most girls came to metal through Nightwish. I honestly don't really understand what I liked about it now. But I guess it was the fact that Tarja was singing there, back when I was a kid. She was so beautiful, she was beautiful in the videos. But it was a long time ago (Participant 11, 28 year old, IT worker).

### **Partner as the Greatest Motivation**

When asked whether they thought that female metalheads would find “their” music on their own, most participants answered that although these cases exist, they are rare. Thus, the most frequent cause and motivation to become involved in metal was the influence of a partner, idol, and/or husband. In this regard, Stašová divided female metalheads into two groups: “Pre-metal Impulse” and “Partner Influence”.

Some of the participants who sought a partner based on the same musical tastes already had some experience with metal in their family. For example, participant 5 grew up in a metal environment. However, the participants admitted that experiences in their formative years, including parental influence, also played a role in the development of their own musical tastes.

P: I think when your parents lead you to music, whatever it is, you don't define that genre until you start to define yourself in some way. Which can be, I don't know, when you're, like, ten, twelve? When a person has more sense and already has that MP3 player and puts the music he wants in there. So if your parents lead you to music in general, you'll find your genre. But I was definitely influenced by my parents listening to AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne and my dad listening to Iron Maiden. However, I have a wide range, I went straight from Brutal Assault to a Robbie Williams concert (Participant 6, 28 year old, online marketer).

While in the first group, women already listened to metal and chose their partner based on their own musical style and the respective subculture, participants in the second group started listening to metal only because of a relationship with a male metalhead. Most of the participants mentioned that this second category of women usually does not last long in the subculture, because it may be just a phase, a momentary fascination, or a byproduct of affection for a male metalhead. This is in contrast to the first group, where common interests, including metal music and visual style, were at the core of the partnership.

G. S.: Do you prefer a metalhead as a partner? I don't know if you have someone or not, but do you search within that circle?

P: I've been thinking about it and actually all but one of them belonged there and the current one does too. But it's not my goal. It just kind of always happens (Participant 3, 20 year old, university student studying Czech language).

G. S.: Did you prefer a metalhead as a partner?

P: Definitely, definitely. That's just, like I said, I was the radical one, so yeah.

G. S.: And was it possible to find someone who met the criteria that you had at that time?

P: Yeah, definitely, I did. But then it just seemed to me that amongst the metalheads in our town, as I knew most of them by then, a lot of them seemed to be not for me, a bit demented... So I was kind of unhappy about it after that. And then I stopped worrying about it, because I realized that it was stupid to be oriented by that. But for a long time, I had it that way, and I still like guys with beards and long hair and six feet (Participant 16, 28 year old, PhD student, researcher).

The women in the first group ultimately concluded that it is impossible to establish meaningful partnerships purely based on shared musical interests. Participant 4 went so far as to say that she would never want another metalhead as a partner.

Participants also commented on women who only started listening to metal due to the influence of their partner:

P: I feel that the women are into metal, so this is related to the first question that was asked here, that they often maybe succumb to the influence of their partner. I feel that they succumb to what the boyfriend is listening to and then maybe they go to festivals with him, even if they don't really feel it honestly, the relationship with the music. That maybe the environment drives them a little bit" (Participant 10, 21 year old, university student, worker in the investment team of a bank).



G. S.: I mean the question is if it was through a boyfriend, a partner, or some girls who mention that they were in love with a guy with long hair...

P: No, no, definitely not. There was an era, but I was just getting into metal. Then I got a little bit harder, but that's just evolution.

G. S.: And do you feel that more girls get into metal through your own life, or do most of them get into this subculture because of the influence of a boyfriend, partner etc.?

P: That's a good question too, and I think a lot of girls will get into it that way, but I don't think it's going to keep them" (Participant 2, 19 year old, university student).

P: So basically all the ones I know got through someone, which was usually just a relationship with a man. Then there's the fact that not everyone sticks with it. The girl gets tired of it, or she gets tired of the guy. Or the community was just a match for her, and she didn't even bother with the music. So the ones that have stayed within the community, even for the music, are really small. It's bad, and I don't like to say it, but for a lot of people it's just a phase and the music was more of a side factor (Participant 4, 30 year old, psychologist, product manager in IT).

### **Conclusion: A Man Behind Everything?**

In terms of the issues outlined in other literature, as Arnett (1996) argues, metal is fraught with feelings of disconnection and demarcation from mainstream society. Participants referred to this using varied but similar terms (outsiderhood, weirdness, otherness, intelligence, etc.). Women's roles in the metal subculture are often marginalized as "more girly" and therefore have little relevance to the overall masculine-centered concept of the metal subculture. The women in this study were themselves critical of other women in the subculture, for example, condemning their "trashy" appearance and the fact that they only took part in metal because of men. A common entryway into metal for many women is the band Nightwish, a group regarded as "feminine" or even "effeminate".

Prototypes that balance masculine and feminine appearance and behavior (Kolářová 2006; Kolářová, Oravcová 2018) have also been mentioned. Here, participants directly divided female metalheads into "masculine", for example, compared to former Arch Enemy singer Angela Gossow, and "feminine", exemplified by soft and ethereal characteristics of so-called "goth girls". The balance between these two types that alternately complement and misunderstand each other is a key component of women's experiences in metal. It was thus the concept of masculinity that emerged as intersecting most of the themes in the study: the man as a source of an image, male energy from which to draw confidence and inspiration, and the man as a ticket into the metal subculture.

The women declared that they play an equal role to men, but there are also things they cannot control, such as the extent to which they will be treated as sexual objects or whether they will be respected at all in the subculture. Even when they are welcomed into the subculture, women still face difficulties because of their gender as many reported that men are prejudiced against women's musical sensibilities or how "cool" a woman is in general.

Female metalheads often choose their partners according to their musical tastes. There are also instances where men bring women to the metal world, yet only in a few cases do these women continue listening to metal when the relationship ends.

To summarize analysis conclusions:

- Female participants perceive women's place in the metal subculture as improving – the number of insider women grows higher, their position is more egalitarian, and male metalheads generally tolerate them more than in the past.
- Participants also feel that outsiders are more accepting of their lifestyle – only two decades ago, female metalheads felt a latent prejudice against them from mainstream society.
- Male metalheads still occasionally distrust the musical sensibilities of female insiders.
- Despite the growing female metal community within the metal subculture, many participants view metal as masculine, and some are fascinated by this masculinity.
- Participants referred mainstream society is perceiving woman in metal via one simple stereotype, whereas insider women are recognizing internal style variability and individual differences in woman metal style. Despite that, we can surely find insider sex symbols and trend-setting visual patterns.
- Metalheads are often attracted by the subculture because of the laid-back atmosphere and the fluidity of a place where everyone can be themselves.
- Female participants do not feel as much sexism inside the subculture as they might in other environments.

In general, female metalheads approach their appearance in terms of the opportunity to look confident, distinctive, and original. The image goes hand in hand with music, which is especially evident at metal events, concerts, and festivals. The masculine-driven element of the metal image is attractive to some female metalheads. However, many also find the opposite – a very feminine and delicate image – equally attractive.

Although society is tolerant towards female metalheads, it still perceives them as “outcasts”, especially in judgments of their appearance. However, this issue needs to be further addressed. Such marginalization is not fully apparent among metalheads, and participants were much more concerned with other topics.

Despite increasing academic attention to the topic of women in metal (see for example Heesch, Scott 2016 or Berkers, Shaap 2018), the study of women in metal culture awaits in-depth interdisciplinary work (Kosek 2021: 45). The exploration of women in Czech metal is only now beginning. Stašová's work has revealed how neglected and complex the topic is and has broached new questions with great research potential that will be further explored as part of her future research. In the end, the role of women in metal deserves a place within (not only Czech) academic research.

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### Abstract

The term "female metalhead" may sound rather abstract. What does she look like and what does she think? Is there a typical female metalhead? This article summarizes qualitative research on woman's motivational resources for participation in the contemporary Czech metal subculture. It discusses factors related to why women listen to metal and the role of men in this process. The research is based on seventeen semi-structured interviews with women in Czech metal. Respective research questions focus on female metalheads' understanding of their position inside the subculture, their visual appearance, reasons for inclination to metal (e.g., partner's influence or an attraction to the metal community), the issue of sex symbols in the metal industry, and issues of elitism and exclusivity. Results show that women within the metal subculture strike a balance between masculinity and femininity and often judge their surroundings from the perspective on these two poles. However, the primary inspiration still drives from the male perspective with its typical visual and musical characteristics.

### Mężczyzna za wszystkim? Motywacyjne źródła słuchania muzyki metalowej wśród kobiet

Termin „kobieta metalowiec”/„metalówa” (ang. „female metalhead”) może brzmieć jako dość abstrakcyjne pojęcie. Jak właściwie miałyby ona wyglądać i co myśleć? Czy istnieje jej „prototyp”? W artykule przedstawiono badania jakościowe źródeł motywacji kobiet do uczestnictwa we współczesnej czeskiej subkulturze metalowej. Omówiono poszczególne czynniki (dlaczego kobiety słuchają metalu) i rolę czynnika męskiego w tym procesie. Badania opierają się na siedemnastu półstrukturalnych wywiadach z uczestniczkami – członkiniami czeskiej subkultury metalowej. Poszczególne pytania badawcze koncentrują się na zrozumie-

niu pozycji kobiety jako fanki metalu wewnątrz subkultury, jej wyglądu zewnętrznego, przyczyn skłonności do metalu (np. wpływ partnera lub zainteresowanie społecznością metalową), kwestii symboliki płci w przemyśle muzyki metalowej czy rodzaju elitarności i ekskluzywności. Wyniki pokazały, że kobiety w obrębie subkultury metalowej balansują pomiędzy męskością a kobiecością i często oceniają swoje otoczenie w oparciu o te dwa bieguny. Jednak główna inspiracja wciąż płynie z męskiej perspektywy z jej typowymi cechami wizualnymi i muzycznymi.

**Keywords:** female metalhead, metal music, woman, subculture, femininity, masculinity

**Słowa kluczowe:** fanka metalu, muzyka metalowa, kobieta, subkultura, kobiecość, męskość

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