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## **Attitudinal meaning and social struggle in heavy metal song lyrics: A corpus-based analysis**

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## **Attitudinal meaning and social struggle in heavy metal song lyrics: A corpus-based analysis**

Heavy metal as a music culture has immense social influence across the world. In recent years scholars have started to scrutinise metal music from a sociocultural perspective; yet many studies lack quantifiable supporting evidence. For a thorough understanding of band members' self-constructed identity, this paper analyses a corpus of lyrics from 1,152 heavy metal songs. It identifies 11 lexical words which have a significantly higher frequency in metal lyrics than in popular lyrics, and a total of 1,386 concordances of the 11 words are analysed using the attitude system (Martin and White, 2005). Analysis shows that heavy metal lyrics are characterized by insecurity, loneliness, sadness and desire in terms of affect, by fearlessness, freedom, and condemnation of social injustice in terms of judgement, and by the representation of unpleasant or even disgusting objects, and the valuation of death as solutions in terms of appreciation. We further argue that these attitudes are reactions to various types of social oppression, such as marginalisation by mainstream ideologies and religions, and are discursive strategies to resist and counter the oppression. At the same time, the attitudes build a distinctive heavy metal identity to reinforce in-group solidarity and to promote the music culture through catharsis.

Keywords: metal music; lyrics; corpus; identity; appraisal system; attitude

### **Introduction**

Heavy metal music spread from the U.K. to America and the rest of the world since the 1970s and boomed across the five continents in the 1990s thanks to the advancement of the Internet (Mayer and Timberlake 2014). There are at least 126,015 bands from 149 countries/regions registered in the Metal Archives (Encyclopaedia Metallum n.d.). Despite (or because of) its widespread influence, heavy metal music has undergone drastic social controversy and criticisms since its advent. For example, in the U.S., the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) called on a senate hearing on the so-called “porn rock” in 1985, and 9 out of the 15 songs listed in the PMRC’s “Filthy 15” (Soylent Communications 2012) were metal songs (Walser 1993). Former Archbishop of New York Cardinal John O’Connor also condemned

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metal for its potential danger of trapping young people into Satanist practice like committing suicide and exorcism (Ostling, Burleigh, and Harris 1990). In Norway, the rise of black metal in the early 1990s caused public outcry over tragedies like church burning and Varg Vikernes' killing of his Mayhem bandmate Euronymous (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, and Levine 2011). The situation is even worse in the Middle East. In 2003, 14 Moroccan metalheads were arrested for “worshipping Satan”, “challenging Islam” and “violating morals”. The Lebanese government banned sales of metal CDs, and the Iranian government clamped down on metal gigs and banned the display of musical instruments on TV (LeVine 2008). Nevertheless, metal music has been gradually accepted as a culture in some European countries as we witness the thriving of annual metal festivals – Wacken Open Air in Germany, Download Festival in the U.K., Hellfest Summer Open Air in France and Tuska Open Air Metal Festival in Finland to name a few.

Consistent with the overall negative views among the general public, many heavy metal studies also adopt a critical stance. Lozon and Bensimon (2014) reviewed studies in several major databases (APA PsycNET, EBSCO, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect [Elsevier], and Wiley Online Library), and found 11 articles published between 1990 and 2013 on the psychological effects of metal music on its fans. Most of the studies showed negative effects. For example, both Martin, Clarke, and Pearce (1993) and Stack, Gundlach, and Reeves (1994) found that metal music is highly associated with suicide, while Rea, MacDonald, and Carnes (2010) found that metal music listeners felt less secure and satisfied. Ekinici et al. (2012) highlighted the association between the preference for metal music and depression. Lacourse, Claes, and Villeneuve (2001) and Scheel and Westefeld (1999) also pointed out negative associations that metal music carries but stayed cautious about the causal relation. Mast and McAndrew (2011) claimed metal lyrics as violent and inducing aggression. Only Recours, Aussaguel, and Trujillo (2009) suggested that metal

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might instead prompt a lower level of anxiety. More recently, Baker and Brown (2016) studied the self-harm wordings in metal lyrics and called on policy makers to attend to the predicament of young fans. Contrary to Baker and Brown's (2016) position, Rowe (2017) found that adolescents take up their metal identity to counter resist peer bullying they encounter day to day.

Different from psychological studies, sociological and cultural research tends to be more sympathetic, scrutinising metalheads' identity and "reasons of becoming" in relation to social oppression and struggle. For example, in the seminal sociological studies of Gaines (1991) and Weinstein (1991), metalheads were portrayed as middle-to-lower class white young men who are unhappy with the mainstream society in various ways. Similarly, Umurhan (2012:129) argued that "heavy metal's aesthetic generally consists of a vigorous musical articulation of and response to adolescent frustration and anger directed at a variety of contemporary society's ills". A central concern of these studies was the understanding of heavy metal identity in relation to social, cultural, racial, religious and other factors. For example, Avelar (2003) studied how the band Sepultura connected their homeland Brazil and the world through music. Dairianathan (2012) investigated how Singaporean Indians reacted to the nation-wide English learning policy through mixing English and Sanskrit lyrics in vedic metal. Knopke (2014) investigated how Kenyan bands negotiated their Christian-and-metal dual identity. A particular aspect of identity that has attracted much attention is masculinity (e.g. Walser 1993; Weinstein 2000; Kahn-Harris 2007; Hill, Lucas and Riches 2015).

In recent years, scholarly examinations of heavy metal music have increased significantly with the establishment of an international scholarly metal studies conference in 2008, the International Society for Metal Music Studies in 2013, and the *Metal Music Studies* refereed journal in 2015. Several major books examining heavy metal have been published (e.g. Bayer 2009; Hill and Spracklen 2010; Hjelm, Kahn-Harris and LeVine 2012; Wallach,

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Berger, and Greene 2011; Brown, Spraklen, Kahn-Harris, and Scott 2016). However, compared with sociological and cultural studies, text-based analysis of heavy metal lyrics is rarer. Arnett (1996) analysed the main themes of 115 metal songs released between 1988 and 1992, and found the themes of violence, angst, protest, myths/legend, hatred, metal life, Satan, sex, love and substance use, as well as the moods of anger, sadness, positiveness and fear. The study was first-of-a-kind in metal studies, but the songs selected and the labels devised are subject to question. Firstly, the 115 songs only came from 6 classic metal bands (i.e. Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Ozzy Osbourne, Metallica, Megadeth and Slayer). Since there are so many subgenres, more songs from more bands should be studied to get a better overview of metal lyrics. Secondly, labels like “violence” and “angst” were subjectively devised by the author, so a more systematic semantic framework is needed to secure reliability. Rafalovich and Schneider (2005) analysed lyrics from 200 metal recordings and found that the lyrics resisted social norms and institutionalised Christianity by worshipping Nordic myth or Crowley’s occult doctrine. The research discussed the asymmetric power relation between cultural/religious institutions and disobedient people, as well as how identities were constructed in relation to cultural politics and religion. However, the findings were based on the analysis of a limited number of self-selected lyrics.

A thorough understanding of the metal identity would rely on a theory-guided analysis of a sufficiently large and randomised sample pool. Bridle (2018) also recognised the importance of corpus analysis and used a diachronic blues lyrics corpus of 795 songs to study ideological changes during the pre- and post-World War Two eras. Addressing the need for more rigorous empirical studies of the metal identity, this paper analyses a corpus of 1,152 metal lyrics by using the attitude framework of the appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005). We particularly focus on attitudinal words that have a significantly higher frequency in heavy metal corpus than in mainstream pop songs in order to understand the unique heavy metal

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identity. In what follows, we will introduce the framework and the methodology. Findings will then be reported and discussed in relation to different forms of social oppression.

## **Methodology: Corpus-based Attitude Analysis**

### *The Attitude System*

Martin and White's (2005) attitude system, which is the most sophisticated subsystem in the appraisal theory, concerns values of emotional responses (affect), values according to which human behaviour is socially assessed (judgement), and values which address the aesthetic qualities of objects and entities (appreciation). Affect evaluates resources for construing emotional reactions and is divided into un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction and dis/inclination. Un/happiness has to do with the extent of feeling happy or unhappy; in/security deals with our anxious or assured feeling about our surroundings; dis/satisfaction refers to feeling of frustration and fulfilment; dis/inclination is about the desire for a condition of events. Judgement assesses human behaviour according to social sanction and social esteem. While judgement of social sanction concerns veracity (i.e. how truthful someone is) and propriety (i.e. how ethical someone is), judgement of social esteem involves the sub-categories of normality (i.e. how special someone is), capacity (i.e. how capable someone is) and tenacity (i.e. how resolute someone is). Appreciation is the evaluation about things, which can be divided into reaction, composition and valuation. Reaction refers to the degree to which things catch our attention; composition concerns balance and complexity; valuation is to do with the value of things, such as originality and usefulness.

The framework serves as an effective tool for analysing both explicit and implicit meanings in a systematic way. However, as with other approaches to discourse analysis, researchers tend to rely on the close reading of a small number of texts, which draws concerns over representativeness and generalizability. Corpus linguistic analysis, on the other hand,

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tends to focus on low-level lexical features and neglect the discursive nature of meaning. To overcome the weakness of both approaches, this study combines corpus-based research with manual text analysis. This is particularly important for attitude analysis as the realization of attitude ranges from single words, sentences to even paragraphs. As van Dijk (1995: 262) argues,

...semantic representation of opinions in attitudes needs to be analysed in context: the mere use or application of a word such as “terrorist” does not imply, as such, that the speaker believes that the word should be so applied and that a social group deserves to be called that way.

The present study therefore includes quantitative calculations for the distribution of attitudes based on manual examination of the relevant concordances in the corpus, followed by qualitative explanations of the resistant strategies used.

### ***Corpus Compilation***

Metal lyrics were first collected from the online archive (“DarkLyrics.com” n.d.), which is open to public access. DarkLyrics.com claims to archive more than 12,000 albums from more than 4,100 metal bands. The archive includes most subgenres such as classic heavy metal (e.g. Black Sabbath), death metal (e.g. Behemoth), black metal (e.g. Abbath), thrash metal (e.g. Death Angel), progressive metal (e.g. Opeth), metalcore (e.g. Avenged Sevenfold), power metal (e.g. Sonata Arctica), gothic metal (e.g. Cradle of Filth), doom metal (e.g. Paradise Lost), symphonic metal (e.g. Therion) and the list can go on. Although it is hard to define clear-cut characteristics, DarkLyrics.com broadly distinguished itself from the pop (e.g. A-Z Lyrics), punk (e.g. PLYrics.com), hip-hop and rap (e.g. urbanlyrics.com) in a sense that only bands which play faster and stronger bass-and-drum tempo or apply heavier distortion are included.

Since many metal bands compose lyrics in English even when their first language is not English (e.g. Finnish bands such as Children of Bodom and Nightwish), only English lyrics were looked at in the present study. One song of each of the 1,152 bands randomly selected from the more than 4,000 bands listed on DarkLyrics.com was included as our data. The sampling was totally randomised to ensure non-intervention from the authors' musical taste and to capture the subgenre diversity in the metal scene. The resulting corpus consists of 204,826 tokens from the lyrics composed by more than a thousand bands.

As our purpose is to understand the distinctive attitudes in heavy metal lyrics, we employed a control apparatus which is a corpus of miscellaneous popular song lyrics collected from ("AZLyrics.com" n.d.). Considering that pop songs are generally longer than metal songs, only 692 pop songs (i.e. approx. 205,169 tokens) were included so that both corpora contain a similar number of words for comparison. In the same vein, the songs were randomly selected from 692 pop musicians to ensure the representativeness of different subgenres. For mainstream metal bands (e.g. Metallica) and metal bands which have substantially changed their genre over their career (e.g. Linkin Park has shifted from nu-metal to pop rock), their different songs may fall into different genres and hence may appear separately in both corpora.

### ***Selection of Lexical Words***

Using WordSmith (Version 7.0) (Scott 2017), a frequency word list was drawn from each corpus. Since grammatical words are repetitively used to serve textual purposes, only lexical words were considered for comparison between the two corpora. The top 152 lexicons in the heavy metal corpus were singled out because their frequencies overwhelmingly outnumber those of the 153<sup>rd</sup> and subsequent ones. Correspondingly the top 152 frequency words in the pop lyrics corpus were looked at for comparison. To understand the unique semantic features



of heavy metal songs, an approach similar to keyword analysis in corpus linguistics was adopted. By comparing the linear correlation in frequencies of the top 152 lexicons in the two corpora, with the P-value set at 0.0001, a significant difference can be found between the choice of lexicons in metal lyrics and that in pop lyrics. Among the top 152 lexicons, some are more frequent in the metal corpus, while others have a similar frequency in both corpora. By calculating the ratio of occurrence of the 152 lexicons in the metal corpus to that in the pop corpus, i.e.  $X \text{ ratio} = (\text{frequency of } X \text{ in the metal corpus}) / (\text{frequency of } X \text{ in the pop corpus})$ , a significant ratio of difference (i.e. all above 10) can be found in 11 out of the 152 cases (see Table 1), indicating the exceptionally high frequency of these 11 words in metal lyrics.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Compared with standard keyword analysis, this method allows for the manual merging of words sharing the same stem but different inflectional suffixes (e.g. ‘soul’ and ‘souls’) when calculating the ratio of occurrence of the top 152 lexicons in the two corpora. As words of the same stem share almost the same semantic meaning, we believe they should be considered as a whole for cross-corpora comparison, despite their minor difference in form. In the case of ‘soul’ and ‘souls’, for example, if analysed separately, both would go unnoticed in the keyness test since the frequency of each is not high enough to top the keyness list. However, when ‘soul’ and ‘souls’ are taken into account as a whole, the two corpora exhibit a significant difference in the frequency of the pair.

The 11 words in Table 1 can already give us a glimpse of the prominent themes of heavy metal songs, such as death, fear, darkness and flesh. However, for a more

comprehensive interpretation, an examination of the collocates and concordances of the words is required. 1,876 concordances were extracted by searching the 11 lexical words in the heavy metal corpus for the analysis of attitude. The result then captures the distinctive attitude profile of heavy metal songs as compared with pop songs.

### ***Coding***

Each line was carefully examined together with the preceding and the following line to understand the contextual meaning; in case of uncertainty, we searched the original lyrics in the repertoire by typing the chunk of lyrics in order to make sense of the abstract lines. Manual reading enabled us to identify attitudinal instances with reference to Martin and White's (2005) appraisal system, to hand-code the lines and to count records in a separate excel workbook. Take Epica's "Sensorium" as an example – from the lines "I'm not afraid to die, I'm afraid to be alive without being aware of it", we can tell the key message is not to demonstrate the courage of not fearing death (positive capability) but to express the insecurity of being unaware of what one has been through (insecurity). As we read along, the following line "I'm so afraid to, I couldn't stand to waste all my energy on things that do not matter anymore" confirms the interpretation of the insecurity of life. Decisions of appraisal types were therefore disambiguated by examining the context. To further guarantee coding accuracy and efficiency, both authors pilot coded 100 instances independently and worked out protocols for dealing with ambiguous cases. All the 1,876 instances were then coded by the first author. Problematic cases were marked and discussed with the second author. 1,386 instances were identified as attitudinal, with 461 expressing affect, 364 involving judgement and 501 showing appreciation of objects.

### **Analysis**

### *Affect*

Two salient features can be noticed in Table 2. Firstly, there are more negative feelings than positive ones, with instances of negative affect outnumbering those of positive affect by approximately three times. We can safely conclude that the 11 words tend to be used to express negative emotions in metal lyrics. Secondly, insecurity, desire and unhappiness stand out from the rest, which will be discussed in detail. Insecurity, or more specifically fear, is the most frequently expressed attitude among all categories, appearing in more than half of the affect instances (i.e. 263 out of the 461 cases).

[Table 2 inserted here]

### *Insecurity*

Typical objects of fear are death and darkness. Death is a frequent object in metal lyrics, as exemplified in excerpt 1 where death is approaching, shadowing, touching and stinking when the band My Dying Bride describes their imagination of their dying day in the song “A Cold New Curse”. Although the song lyrics do not specify who dies in what fashion, the first-person point of view of being cursed to death is the central idea of the whole lyrics. As the song transits from a slower to faster tempo after the line “here it comes, closer, closer, closer” (Excerpt 1), death is portrayed as a creeping creature which casts a shadow and puts its hand on the protagonist. As the lyrics progress, a strong sense of insecurity is gradually building up along enduring waiting until the character’s (i.e. the first-person perspective (“us”)) life is finally drained off.

Another major object which builds up anxiety in the lyrics is darkness. Darkness represents a sense of unknowingness that one cannot be sure what to expect. A classic

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example is Iron Maiden's "Fear of The Dark" in which "I have a constant fear that something's always near" (Excerpt 2) describes a sense of impending doom following and lurking behind when the light is out. The lyrics successfully trigger immense insecurity since they debate whether something is really out there or whether it is just our mind playing tricks. While death signals the termination of life, darkness represents uncertainty. In other words, many metal bands frame mortality and uncertainty as horror.

Excerpt 1.

Here it comes, closer, closer

At every hour death seems closer

Long shadows surround me, call me

I feel its hand upon me

I smell its death upon me

And its midnight conquers me

And now – it is me!

(My Dying Bride's song "A Cold New Curse" from the 2015 album *Feel The Misery*.)

Excerpt 2.

When the light begins to change

I sometimes feel a little strange

A little anxious when it's dark

Fear of the dark, fear of the dark

I have constant fear that something's always near

Fear of the dark, fear of the dark

I have a phobia that someone's always there

(Iron Maiden's song "Fear Of The Dark" from the 1992 album *Fear Of The Dark*.)

### *Unhappiness*

Unhappiness is another popular emotion incited in metal lyrics, with 76 instances found. The analysis shows that unhappiness is elicited by two main conditions: rejection and numbness. As revealed by the concordances, the rejection metalheads face could be found in religious and fantasised settings. Amon Amarth's "First Kill" is a typical example – the band imagines

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a story in which the protagonist killed the Earl's right-hand man in order to protect a female and was forced to flee. The lyrics adopt the first-person perspective and listeners can imagine being an outcast in society, as in the line "I am a nomad without home" (Excerpt 3). "Dead" in the line "to my father I was dead" does not refer to physical death but disownment.

Although the lyrics are set in a fantasy world, similar real-life situations can be recounted where people feel rejected and alienated.

Another source of unhappiness is numbness. Numbness is exemplified in Excerpt 4 "indurate, senseless, dead soul to the core", where the thrash metal band Exodus express a feeling of "coldness" "unfeeling" and apathy as they witness frequent famine, poverty, killing and thieving.

Excerpt 3.

To my father I was dead, he took his hand from me

He drove me away, I was shunned

My one and only choice was to leave this land

To become the pagan they would hunt

I am an outcast all alone

I'm a nomad without home

I am an outlaw

I'm disowned and I am no man's son

(Amon Amarth's song "First Kill" from the 2016 album *Jomsviking*.)

Excerpt 4.

Nothing seems to faze me anymore

Indurate, senseless, dead soul to the core

This lift has left me cold, unfeeling

I find pity so unappealing

...

I'm so disassociated

I'm sick of what I've become

But this world has rendered me

So fucking numb

(Exodus' song "Numb" from the 2014 album *Blood In Blood Out*.)

### *Desire*

Metal lyrics not only express insecurity and unhappiness, but also yearn for unattainable things in reality. The analysis shows that the main objects of desire are salvation and death. The lexical word "souls" frequently collocates with "to save". For example, in excerpt 5, "dear Braveheart save our souls, release us from this penance" demonstrates a need for salvation. The line is extracted from the short-lived band X-Wild's album *Savageland* which focuses on the theme of the Scottish knight Sir William Wallace, the "Braveheart". In the lyrics of "Children Of The Underground", child labourers working in mines for the Duke pitifully call for help. The situation is reminiscent of the child labour today. Metal lyrics as such express a strong desire to seek help.

The second call is a contradictory yearning for "life" and "death" at the same time, as shown in Majestic Downfall's "Lifeless", the lyrics of which vaguely describe the final days of dying. "I crave for death to feel alive" (Excerpt 6) is a typical example, illustrating metalheads' mentality of reconstruction through destruction. In this instance, "death" is coded as an object of desire rather than insecurity, because the lyrics do not suggest any uncomfortable feeling but longingness, as if death could resurrect the deceased and bring new hope. This contradiction can be reconciled from the perspective that "life" does not literally mean the breathe-in-breathe-out kind of life, but an ideal one with a purpose to live for, and "death" means the termination of one's life or destruction.

Excerpt 5.

For heaven's sake we must not let them fall

We have to fight the evil that men do

A cry goes up

Dear Braveheart save our souls

Release us from this penance

Oh so cruel

(X-Wild's song "Children Of The Underground" from the 1996 album *Savageland*.)

Excerpt 6.

I'm bleeding, soaked in thorns

I am drowning breath by breath

Bring me life where light is no more

I crave for death, to feel alive

(Majestic Downfall's song "Lifeless" from the 2013 album *Three*.)

### ***Judgement***

In contrast to the taken-for-granted assumption that metal lyrics focus on the dark side of human beings, more "positive" judgements have been found in the corpus. As shown in Table 3, a record of 206 "positive" and 158 "negative" judgements shows that the 11 words are indeed used to judge people and their deeds more positively than many suppose. "Positive capacity" and "negative propriety" are the two most prominent categories here.

[Table 3 inserted here]

### ***Capacity***

Judgements of capacity in metal lyrics often concern bravery and power. "Conquest" is a key repetitive theme in the metal corpus, which can be considered as a type of capability metalheads often imagine in the fantasised world. Behemoth's "O Father O Satan O Sun!" exemplifies a pagan setting in which the lyrics function like a rhapsody, praising the alternative trinity (i.e. reminiscences and tease of the Holy Father, Holy Son, and Holy Spirit). Lyrics, such as "hear me, and make all spirits subjects unto me" and "every spell and scourge of god may be obedient unto me" (Excerpt 7) are instances of power display – reinforcing the capability of ruling over others.

Excerpt 7.

Hear me, and make all spirits subjects unto me

So that every spirit of the firmament and of the ether

Upon the earth and under the earth

On dry land and in the water

Of whirling air and of rushing fire

And every spell and scourge of god

May be obedient unto me

(Behemoth's song "O Father O Satan O Sun!" from the 2014 album *The Satanist*.)

### *Negative propriety*

Apart from the assertion of power, metal lyrics often condemn social wrongs. Major targets of condemnation include injustice, the restriction on spiritual quests, and hypocrisy. Metal lyrics often blatantly describe victims suffering from wars, religious oppression and deception. Take Terrorizer's "A Dying Breed" as an example. It imagines a city full of quasi-zombies whose identities cannot be ascertained; they are mistreated and if they are shot dead, sensational media will gain money from the horrendous killing images. Explicit accusations, such as "innocent humans are sentenced to death without any fair judgement" (Excerpt 8), directly condemn the sacrifice of the innocence.

The negative attitude towards religious monopoly is also supported with evidence in the category of "negative propriety". The concordances suggest that the suppression of religious freedom is deemed morally incorrect. The oppression is realized, for example, in Pathfinder's "March to The Darkest Horizon". The lyrics imagine a holy war summoning every creature and man to fight with magic, claws and swords in the name of religious freedom. Hinted by Excerpt 9 "the gods still ask for more blood", we can recall similar killing settings in the past and ongoing religious conflicts which mercilessly take lives away.



Finally, not staying true to oneself is a moral wrong subject to condemnation as well. People who have strayed away from their true selves are criticised in the lyrics. For example, in Dimmu Borgir's "The Sinister Awakening", the line "I believe my truth to be a much greater thing than a manufactured lie" (Excerpt 10) expresses a belief that the truth is preferred to hypocrisy, even if the truth means living as a sinister. "God" in "being my own god is all I was meant to be" refers to the faith of never losing ourselves or succumbing to others' manipulation. As the final lines of "The Sinister Awakening" are the repetitions of the term "Antichristus Spiritualis" which suggest "spiritualism against Christianity", we argue that Christianity is one particular object of hypocrisy which the lyrics defy.

Excerpt 8.

Injustice is alive and well in the civilized world  
Humans playing god with innocent lives sentenced to death  
No trial, no lawyer, no chance  
Hated and despised  
You made me what I am  
I'll take a bullet for you  
I don't care to die  
Sensational media created my image  
Evil dogs of death  
They call my breed  
(Terrorizer's song "A Dying Breed" from the 2012 album *Hordes Of Zombies*.)

Excerpt 9.

Forward march!  
March to the portal of darkness  
We deny the heavens – the gods still ask for more blood  
Fight! Fight with your sword and pure magic  
Never show your mercy! No pity  
No tears on battlefields  
(Pathfinder's song "March To The Darkest Horizon" from the 2012 album *Fifth Element*.)

Excerpt 10.

I believe my truth to be a much greater thing than a manufactured lie  
Too great to comprehend  
Where I come from  
There's no higher authority but me  
Being my own god is all I was meant to be  
(Dimmu Borgir's song "The Sinister Awakening" from the 2007 album *In Sorte Diaboli*.)

### ***Appreciation***

The analysis shows mixed attitudes towards objects in metal discourse (i.e. appreciation), with the most prominent categories being "negative reaction" and "positive valuation", appearing 227 and 127 times respectively.

[Table 4 inserted here]

### ***Negative reaction***

"Negative reaction" is used to represent the aversion to the surroundings, especially unpleasant objects, such as "human flesh", "corpse", "dead bodies" and the alike. The extensive description of dead bodies is found to be a signature of heavy metal lyrics. For example, "flesh peeling in strips" (Excerpt 11) refers to the bodies blasted by atomic bombs in Hiroshima, which presents a horrendous visual image that the general public may not appreciate but at the same time invokes an anti-war warning. In fact, the excerpt comes from Sacrifice's album "The Ones I Condemn", which recurrently represents dead bodies and wars via lyrics.

Excerpt 11.  
In seconds, eighty thousand die.  
Hiroshima.  
Flesh peeling in strips  
Not many have survived  
...

The corpses burn in piles on the streets  
Their ashes and the fallout cover all beneath  
(Sacrifice's song "Hiroshima" from the 2009 album *The Ones I Condemn*.)

### *Positive valuation*

Dreadful though they are in general, objects depicted in metal lyrics are sometimes valuable, useful and enlightening. Via the portrayal of the positive value of targets such as "path" and "death", metal lyrics bring hope to listeners and seek remedies to solve problems and answer questions on a proactive basis. Death, the most frequent lexical word in the metal corpus, is used for negotiating various attitudes including "positive valuation". For example, in Abominant's "The Fallen" which recounts a story of a fallen angel, death is an option one could, as hinted by the lyrics, choose to end miseries in life. "May I find the answer in death to forget my past?" (Excerpt 12) implies that death is a probable solution to bad memories. In the world of metal, the termination of one's life is not as fearful as it seems in reality. Though we cannot jump to conclude that all metal lyrics instigate suicidal/murdering thoughts, we argue that a portion of metal lyrics do convey such ideas.

Another top lexical word appraised, "path", is also used to convey an abstract idea deemed positively valuable. For example, in Left in Torment's Saturn-themed song "In Sorrow I Rise", the lyrics talk about abysses and the search for personal growth through bitterness. "Your path was the gift" (Excerpt 13) positively and directly encourages people to move on, since the "path" is a gift which has an enlightening value. The struggle between succumbing to death and believing in a bright future is a signature feature of metal lyrics.

Excerpt 12.

Open my eyes, awake in the afterlife  
Shadows reap sweet sorrow to reach my last fantasy  
May I find what I seek in death?  
May I find the answer in death to forget my past?

Or have I lost my way for eternity

The fallen

(Abominant's song "The Fallen" from the 2000 album *Ungodly*.)

Excerpt 13.

Your path was the gift and not its ending

Once I gained this knowledge

Every step further I grow

What once was damnation,

Finally becomes ascension

Holding the key I proceed,

Awakened from agonal slumber

The journey comes to its end, as comes mine

(Left in Torment's song "In Sorrow I Rise" from the 2008 album *Saturnian Rites*.)

### **Discussion: Heavy Metal Lyrics as a Counter Discourse**

Our analysis shows that heavy metal lyrics are dominated by the fear of death and darkness, the sadness about being rejected and numbness, the desire for salvation and death, the capability of conquest, the condemnation of injustice, wars, religious restriction and hypocrisy, the distaste for dead bodies, and the usefulness of death and paths. Our findings have provided empirical evidence of the emotions and attributes of the metal community. Many labels in existing literature, such as anger (Arnett 1996), aggression (Mast and McAndrew 2011), substance use, delinquency (Arnett 1996; Lacourse, Claes, and Villeneuve 2001; Martin, Clarke, and Pearce 1993), sexual promiscuity and perversion claimed by Dr. Stuessy ("Statements of Dr. Joe Stuessy, University of Texas at San Antonio, and Dr. Paul King" 1985) could not be found in our data. Nevertheless, our analysis confirms some metal lyrics do challenge religions (i.e. consistent with the finding of low religiosity in Swami et al. (2013)), show signs of self-destruction (including suicide) and alienation (Arnett 1996; St-Laurent 2016), and yearn for help (i.e. consistent with the finding of the decrease in security in Rea, MacDonald, and Carnes (2010)). For the three labels suggested by Arnett (1996),

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namely “sadness”, “positive” and “fear”, our findings help explain why metal lyrics sound depressing, what metal band members are positive about, and what they fear. The lyrics sound depressing because band members are rejected by the mainstream society; the lyrics are suggestive of their positive capability of conquering and fighting religious restrictions; the major objects of fear are death (i.e. suicide, killing) and darkness.

We further argue that the patterns of attitude in the metal corpus are responses to the oppression in reality. These include (1) countering responses of challenging religious oppression, blaming injustice, and seeking solutions, as well as (2) emotional responses of fear and unhappiness for being rejected by the mainstream society. Explicit social oppression is often seen in (Middle) East Asian and North African countries, such as the arrest of metal members in Morocco and Egypt, the clampdown on metal gigs in Iran (LeVine 2008), and the refusal to issue performance visas in Hong Kong (Chan 2018; Wright and Leung 2017). The said oppression involves physical restrictions prohibiting some bands from performing their music. Meanwhile, implicit oppression is imposed by means of media censorship. Apart from the compulsory “Parental Advisory Explicit Content” label on album sleeves in the U.S., the Lebanese government has even banned the sales of metal CDs. The Turkish national newspaper made derogatory coverage on metal, hinting the music genre would prompt suicide and Satanic human sacrifice (LeVine 2008).

In response to the oppression, “negative propriety” and “positive capacity” are used to show the resistance against the authority. The lyrics boast the confidence to challenge the religious restrictions authorised by the government and favoured by society (e.g. Moroccan metalheads were arrested for challenging Islam); the lines also condemn injustice (e.g. the arrest of metal fans) and reiterate that we should conquer others by whatever means it takes. The display of power in metal lyrics resonates with the three focal concerns of lower class culture identified by Miller (1958), including “toughness”, “smartness” and “autonomy”. This

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finding is also in line with Djurslev's (2014) sample analysis of Alexander the Great themed songs, which found that the lyrics often thematised and highly praised "conquest" and "power". By chanting the capability of conquest, metal lyrics strategically position the metal community as a mighty bloc for the greater good. As metal lyrics condemn social wrongs, such as the arrest of innocent fans and the suppression of religious freedom, an "anti-hegemonic" identity is constructed, framing metal bands as guardians of the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion.

Counter discourse to the oppression brought by media censorship and rejection by the mainstream society can be traced to the "negative happiness" and "negative security" negotiated in metal lyrics. Mainstream media (e.g. the Turkish national newspaper) on the one hand pride themselves on the code of ethics that bias shall not be made in objective journalism, but on the other hand accuse metal of inducing suicide and murders for a single incident. Metal bands who have never committed any crime not only fear being misunderstood and alienated, but also resent the fact that metalheads by large are underrepresented and inaccurately reported. As the appraisal of the lyrics suggests, metal bands fight back – it is unhappy to be rejected from the mainstream society (e.g. the ban on metal CD sales in Lebanon), and metal bands are deprived of the freedom of speech granted by the constitution (e.g. lyrics censorship and the "Parental Advisory Explicit Content" labelling).

The last response to different forms of oppression is to seek solutions. As observed from the analysis, "death" is often explicitly suggested as a feasible solution both to various life problems and tremendous pain. On the one hand, a fear of "death" can be found; on the other hand, the lyrics try to convince listeners of the value of death. The justification is that "death", to metal composers, is a solution and an end. Death can broadly mean self-destruction. Frandsen (2010) compared such self-destruction to rituals of rediscovering one's

true self, from being alienated to finding fellow metalheads and sacrificing for the community. In fact, the extensive depiction of “decaying bodies” (negative reaction), according to Hoffin (2018), symbolises the metal belief that decay/destruction brings about new consciousness. This is consistent with British metal bands’ inclination to portray dystopia for the sake of criticising and rectifying social wrongs (Taylor 2009). “Path” on the other hand is often used in a positive fashion. Through metaphors, the lyrics express the willingness to walk a different path (even a difficult one) to pursue dreams and to fight against various forms of social oppression.

It is important to point out the emotions and attitudes discussed above are not merely passive reactions to social oppression; they are also strategically deployed to construct a distinctive metal identity, or an imaginary community (Hill, Lucas, and Riches 2015), to reinforce ingroup solidarity and to promote metal culture. While “high cultures” enjoy criticising “low cultures” on the moral highland, metal bands also benefit from the blame and oppression through defining their own identity and claiming their own niche. In many ways, heavy metal can be described as an “us-versus-them” culture in which “us” represents the members of the heavy metal music community and “them” represents those individuals and entities viewed as oppressive “others”. When such differentiation no longer exists, metal would be readily assimilated into the mainstream and lose its distinctive “alienated” status. For example, Okunew (2016) discussed how East German heavy metal lost its revolutionary status once the social oppression (e.g. the Iron Curtain before the demolition of the Berlin Wall) was gone. The construal of emotions such as “unhappiness”, “loneliness” and “desire for salvation” can be an effective way to establish a unique fan base through eliciting similar sentiments experienced by some people. Rafalovich (2006) referred to the phenomenon of “metal bands turning their emotion inside out” as catharsis, and borrowed Foucault’s “confessing animal” idea to explain our human instinct to confess and listen. Barnett (2017)

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analogised Black Sabbath's lyrics to Greek tragedies as both offer cathartic therapy. It is through sound and lyrics metal bands can tell fans what they have been through, be it physical or mental, or concrete or abstract. Metal fans on the receiving end also experience the therapeutic effects of catharsis. Kneer's (2016) lexical decision task showed metal fans' likelihood to associate metal with stress reduction; Kahn-Harris (2007) suggested that metal lyrics somehow give voice to listeners' internal aggression and listeners become less depressed. Indeed, the cathartic function is key in marketing for sustaining the heavy metal community and the order within (Sinclair and Dolan, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

Using the attitude system (Martin and White 2005), the present study analysed 1,386 concordances of the 11 lexical key words which were used with a significantly higher frequency in the metal corpus than in the pop corpus. The analysis showed that metal lyrics usually convey a sense of insecurity, alienation, sadness, and desire for death and salvation in terms of affect. In terms of judgement, metal lyrics highlight the core values of conquest, condemnation on wars and anti-hypocrisy. In terms of appreciation, objects may appear useful and practical in some sense, but they can also be undesirable, unpleasant or even disgusting. We argue that the distinctiveness of metal lyrics is only formulated under specific social circumstances, and the analysis enables us to make sense of such distinctiveness with the underlying social reasons, i.e. the oppression from the mainstream ideology and religion. Meanwhile, the attitudes are articulated not only to counter social oppression but also to proclaim the metal identity and to compete with other music cultures. The systematic corpus analysis of large-scale empirical data using the attitude framework provides a methodological approach that fully captures the attitudinal meanings of heavy metal lyrics. The result



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provides a new understanding of the metal identity on the one hand, and sheds light on the dialectic relationship between metal discourse and social practice on the other.

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### **Appendix: Song lyrics in citation**

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## Tables and figures

**Table 1. Lexical words with a ratio of frequency difference above 10.**

Words	Metal Frequency	Mainstream Frequency	Ratio
DEATH	458	21	21.81
FEAR	277	18	15.39

DARKNESS	215	18	11.94
FLESH	160	10	16.00
HUMAN	135	10	13.50
GODS	117	2	58.50
SOULS	117	11	10.64
ETERNAL	108	1	108.00
PATH	102	10	10.20
STEEL	98	5	19.60
ENDLESS	89	8	11.13

**Table 2. Affect in heavy metal lyrics (N=461).**

	Desire	Happiness	Security	Satisfaction	Total
Positive	<b>78</b>	4	20	11	113
Negative	4	<b>76</b>	<b>263</b>	5	348

**Table 3. Judgement in heavy metal lyrics (N=364).**

	Capacity	Normality	Tenacity	Veracity	Propriety	Total
Positive	<b>112</b>	27	35	5	27	206
Negative	36	8	13	12	<b>89</b>	158

**Table 4. Appreciation in heavy metal lyrics (N=501).**

	Composition	Reaction	Value	Total
Positive	0	83	<b>127</b>	210
Negative	0	<b>227</b>	64	291